

FOCAL ARTICLE

Employability and Career Success: Bridging the Gap Between Theory and Reality

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Abstract

Employability is defined as the capacity to gain and retain formal employment, or find new employment if necessary. Reasons for unemployment are often attributed to economic factors, but psychological factors associated with employability also contribute to the problem. Consequently, industrial-organizational psychologists should be uniquely suited to contribute to policy solutions for enhancing employability. This review begins by surveying the most common research approach to employability—the study of career success—which psychologists believe is determined by cognitive abilities, personality, and educational achievement. Next, we review the literature concerning what employers actually want. This section highlights the importance of social skills (being rewarding to deal with) as a key determinant of employability. We conclude by proposing a model for understanding the psychological determinants of employability and for bridging the gap between what psychologists prescribe and what employers want.

Employability is defined as the ability to gain and maintain a job in a formal organization (Fugate, Kinicki, & Ashforth, 2004; Hillard & Pollard, 1998), and has become a politically significant topic. In the United States, official unemployment figures have been high since the 2001 recession and reached 10% in 2010. This figure does not include the millions of unemployed people who have stopped searching for a job; when included, the Bureau of Labor Statistics (2011) reports that only 64% of the potential work force

is employed. Helping the unemployed become more employable is now a public policy issue: Over 40% of unemployed people have been jobless for at least two years (The Economist, 2010).

There are many causes of unemployment, and analyses of the current epidemic focus on cyclical versus structural factors in the economy. Cyclical unemployment is because of a decrease in aggregate-level demand for goods and services, which results in fewer jobs. Structural unemployment refers to a mismatch between the qualifications employers seek and the skills of the available labor force. Evidence suggests that both factors explain the current global trend toward increasing unemployment and that structural unemployment has

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been on the rise in the United States for some time (Chen, Kannan, Trehan, & Lounгани, 2011). Many analysts believe that a decline in human capital explains the seeming paradox between high rates of unemployment and the difficulty employers have in finding qualified job seekers. Others note that many high paying manufacturing jobs have moved offshore and that many construction jobs vanished with the collapse of the housing bubble, leaving behind a growing population of otherwise willing workers who lack the skills needed for jobs in the technology and service industries.

Although psychologists have studied employability since the 1950s (Feintuch, 1955), it has never been a mainstream research topic. Furthermore, there is a gap between academic research on occupational performance and the realities of the hiring process. On the one hand, a substantial empirical literature demonstrates the importance of certain psychological attributes, including cognitive ability and personality, for predicting job performance. On the other hand, few business managers read this literature (Rynes, Brown, & Colbert, 2002). Employers are more interested in employees' social skills than their cognitive ability (Chamorro-Premuzic & Furnham, 2010) and prefer their own competency models to academic prescriptions for success. In our combined careers of over 70 years, we have known many bright people (as defined by IQ scores and academic achievement) who spent their lives working in temporary jobs, freeloaded, or collecting unemployment benefits. What separates these smart but unemployable people from their less gifted but more employable contemporaries?

This article is organized in three sections. The first reviews the *psychological* literature on individual differences in career success and summarizes the lessons we have learned from this research. The second section concerns the *employers'* view of employability: It reviews what employers actually want in new hires. In the final section, we propose a model for unifying both perspectives by conceptualizing

employability in terms of employers' perceptions of job candidates' ability to: (a) get along with coworkers—*rewarding*; (b) learn and do the job—*able*; and (c) be productive—*willing*. We consider the psychological determinants of these attributions and offer some guidelines for future psychological research on employability.

Employability and Career Success: What Psychologists Prescribe

Empirical research on individual differences in career success represents the main psychological contribution to the study of employability. This literature distinguishes between objective and subjective measures of career success, a distinction that is supported by modest correlations between the two (ranging from .18 to .30; Ng & Feldman, 2010). We focus on objective indicators because some people are "predisposed to evaluate their careers favorably" (Baruch & Bozionelos, 2011, p. 83)—that is, happy people are happy about everything (Pavot & Diener, 2011)—and because objectively defined career success provides a more consistent criterion for making generalizations. In line with Judge, Higgins, Thoresen, & Barrick (1999), we define objective career success in terms of occupational prestige and financial attainment, both of which can be assessed quantitatively.

The career success literature is typically organized in terms of three models called the human capital, the structural, and the social capital views. All three models are well supported from an empirical perspective, but psychologists tend to focus on the first (Becker, 1975). According to the human capital view, organizations distribute rewards to their members according to their contributions. The ability to contribute to an organization depends on having relevant competencies, which can be acquired in various ways. This view implicitly assumes that individuals compete for the rewards available in organizations, and some are more successful than others (Brown & Hesketh, 2004).

Many researchers believe that education is the most important component of human capital (McArdle, Waters, Briscoe, & Hall, 2007), but the evidence suggests that the relationship between educational achievement and career success is only modest. For example, in a meta-analysis of 50 studies and 62 samples, Bretz (1989) found that the validity of college grades for predicting earnings and supervisory ratings was erratic with correlations varying between $-.25$ and $.43$, and a nonsignificant average effect size of $d = .39$. Grade point average (GPA) barely predicted starting salary and did not predict salary growth thereafter. In a later study, Judge, Cable, Boudreau, and Bretz (1995), using a sample of 1,388 U.S. executives, found that educational level, quality, prestige, and degree type significantly, but moderately, predicted financial success. Similarly, Pfeffer and Fong (2002) reviewed the literature on the utility of business school education and concluded that neither an MBA degree nor GPA were consistently related to pay and promotions, although the prestige of the institution was somewhat related to these measures of career success. More recently, Ng, Eby, Sorensen, and Feldman (2005) meta-analyzed this research and found that indicators of educational achievement correlated modestly but positively with subsequent financial success ($r = .21$). Thus, although education is reliably associated with career success, the effects are relatively small; the amount of unexplained variance suggests that other factors may also be important. It could be argued that the modest effects of college grades on subsequent career success are a function of the restriction of range observed at higher levels of career success, that is, the fact that academic/educational qualifications are higher and more homogeneous in more competitive, desirable, or highly-skilled jobs. Thus, once you are “smart enough”—in terms of your academic qualifications—other factors are more important in determining your success levels. On a practical note, GPA is easily obtained and captures years of reliable

performance differences between people, which makes it a useful predictor variable. However, as Chamorro-Premuzic and Furnham (2010) point out, “recruiters often ignore GPA when recommending selection and in some circumstances even recommend selecting candidates with lower GPA” (p. 82).

Because educational attainment often acts as a “first-pass filter” in personnel selection, it is instructive to know what predicts educational attainment. This topic has been studied in detail (Chamorro-Premuzic & Arteché, 2008). Psychologists have traditionally argued that educational attainment is a function of cognitive ability, but several recent studies highlight the importance of personality characteristics as predictors of academic performance. Recent empirical evidence combining the results of the main meta-analytic studies in this area (described below) suggests that cognitive ability and personality are equally important predictors of educational attainment (von Stumm, Hell, & Chamorro-Premuzic, 2011).

For example, Nofhle and Robins (2007) show, across four samples, that the five-factor model (FFM) dimensions of Conscientiousness and Openness significantly predict college achievement test scores (SATs) and college GPA. In a large meta-analytic study ($N = 70,000$), Poropat (2009) reports significant correlations between Agreeableness, Conscientiousness, and Openness and academic performance. Another large meta-analysis ($N = 72,431$) by Crede and Kuncel (2010) shows that study habits predict academic performance as well as standardized tests and previous grades. Ng and Feldman (2010), in a meta-analytic study of 455 independent samples, report that Conscientiousness and cognitive ability predict educational level, which then predicts salary level. Finally, von Stumm, Hell, and Chamorro-Premuzic (2011) present a mega-analysis of these and other meta-analytic studies and conclude that effort, ability, and curiosity—“a hungry mind”—have independent effects on academic achievement. The standardized mega-analytic regression

coefficient for ability (psychometric g) was .35; the coefficients for Conscientiousness and curiosity measures were .20.

In a balanced overview, Kuncel, Ones, and Sackett (2010) conclude that personality and cognitive ability are both important predictors of work and life success. It is interesting to note that hiring managers seem to pay at least as much attention to personality characteristics as they do to intelligence (Dunn, Mount, Barrick, & Ones, 1995). In fact, surveys of HR practitioners show that they may even devalue IQ data; for example, in a review of 785 articles from *HR Magazine* (which has a readership of 200,000), the authors found virtually no mention of IQ, general mental ability, g , cognitive ability, or intelligence (Rynes, Giluk, & Brown, 2007).

The empirical literature clearly shows that IQ and personality predict educational performance; moreover, the same variables that predict educational achievement predict job performance. Roberts, Kuncel, Shiner, Caspi, and Goldberg (2007) evaluate the links between personality and income, occupational prestige, long-term unemployment, and occupational stability, and conclude that “personality traits predict all of the work-related outcomes”; and that “the modal effect size of personality traits is comparable with the effect of childhood SES and IQ on similar outcomes” (p. 333). Consistent with these conclusions, Judge et al. (1999) compiled a sample of 354 people from longitudinal research conducted at the Institute for Human Development at UC Berkeley in the 1950s. In this sample, they found that personality and IQ assessed in childhood each predicted occupational status in adulthood, yielding a multiple correlation of .64.

Recently, economists have begun studying the links between individual characteristics and employment outcomes and their research parallels the findings from applied psychology. For example, Lindqvist and Westman (2011) studied a large sample of 18-year-old Swedish soldiers to examine the relationship between cognitive and noncognitive skills and labor market outcomes.

They report that, compared to measures of cognitive ability, measures of noncognitive ability (e.g., responsibility, independence, persistence, emotional stability, and social skill) were, in combination, better predictors of wages, employment status, and annual earnings.

In summary, then, the conventional wisdom of applied psychology maintains that, in the hiring process, employers should be most interested in the degree to which applicants possess “cognitive ability, conscientiousness, and other personality characteristics that they believe add value to their business” (Baruch & Bozionelos, 2011, p. 83), with the primary emphasis on cognitive ability (Kuncel, Ones, & Sackett, 2010; Schmidt & Hunter, 1992).

There are, however, some interesting qualifications to these otherwise consistent findings. Most importantly, as Baruch and Bozionelos (2011) note, doing a good job does not guarantee career success; in fact, job performance and career success only correlate about .30 (cf. Carmeli, Shalom, & Weisberg, 2007; Van Scotter, Motowidlo, & Cross, 2000). Baruch and Bozionelos suggest three reasons for this modest correlation. First, career success sometimes depends on factors outside the control of individual actors; for example, in modern Japan, many highly qualified engineering graduates cannot find work, which obviously impedes their career success. Second, career success depends on the political structure of organizations—for example, changes in leadership are often accompanied by other staffing changes, and alliances can determine who gets which job—or no job at all. Third, performance appraisal systems, which directly mediate career success, are almost always “imperfect” (Latham & Mann, 2006) and subject to nonperformance related influences. For example, in a field study of executives conducting performance appraisals, it was concluded that performance appraisals primarily reflect personal politics, defined as attempts to “enhance or protect their self-interests ... which represents a source of bias

or inaccuracy in employee appraisal" (p. 184). In another field study, Varma, DeNisi, and Peters (1996) found that performance appraisals are a function of how much supervisors like their employees. Further research has identified some of the factors that bias performance evaluations and career outcomes. For example, Judge and Cable (2004) report, in a meta-analysis of four samples ($N=8590$), a correlation of .26 between employee height and income. And in a related study, Judge, Hurst, and Simon (2009) report a significant correlation between physical attractiveness and income (.24), leading the authors to conclude that looks are important determinants of income and financial strain (p. 742). Finally, cultural attitudes and stereotypes constrain employability, regardless of a person's actual competence. Most notably, women earn less and get worse jobs than men, even when they are as well educated and have the same aspirations (OECD, 2011).

Determinants of Employability: What Employers Want

In contrast with the large body of research concerning the psychological determinants of career success, there has been little research on the determinants of employability (Baruch & Bozionelos, 2011). Any serious answer to this question should begin by considering what employers actually want in their new employees—after all, hiring organizations ultimately define who is employed. We understand, of course, that individual hiring managers can be biased, and we are proud of the fact that the methods of industrial and organizational (I–O) psychology tend to reduce employment discrimination and advance social justice (Dipboye & Colella, 2005; Lefkowitz & Lowman, 2010). However, by aggregating across hiring managers and organizations, we find some consensus regarding the general qualities sought in employees.

The U.S. Department of Labor (1991) during the Reagan administration conducted the first large-scale study of what employers want. The Secretary's

Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills (SCANS) surveyed business owners, union officials, public employees, managers, and private-sector workers to determine the performance demands of modern employment. The SCANS survey identified five broad categories of critical competencies that the researchers referred to as "work place know how," as follows: (a) *resources*—being able to identify and allocate resources; (b) *interpersonal skills*—being able to work with others; (c) *information*—being able to acquire and use information; (d) *systems*—being able to understand complex interrelationships; and (e) *technology*—being able to work with a variety of technologies. Significantly, the SCANS report identified interpersonal skills as being as important as any other competency for the workforce of the future; this departs from the Department of Labor's historic emphasis on cognitive ability as defined by the General Aptitude Test Battery (GATB). A related survey study by the Bureau of National Affairs (1988) reported that employers complain of three kinds of worker deficiencies: (a) poor problem solving, (b) poor personal management, and (c) poor interpersonal skills. The survey's emphasis on interpersonal skills reflected the increasing use of teams in the workplace (Chen, Kanfer, DeShon, Mathieu, & Kozlowski, 2009).

Noe, Hollenbeck, Gerhart, and Wright (1994) observe that (in the pre-digital era) organizations often recruit job applicants through newspaper want ads. Because they pay for the ads, the ads should reflect what employers want in new hires. Based on this reasoning, Hogan and Brinkmeyer (1994) conducted a comprehensive content analysis of employment ads. The researchers subscribed to newspapers from each demographic region of the United States for 6 months, clipped every major employment ad ($N=6,326$), and then content-analyzed them. Overall, 47% of the ads required "good interpersonal skills," which were deemed essential for 71% of the jobs involving client contact, 78% of the jobs requiring coworker interaction, 83% of

the jobs involving subordinate interaction, and 84% of the jobs requiring management interaction. The conclusion seems clear: From the employers' perspective, the single-most important characteristic determining employability is interpersonal skill or social competence. Similarly, according to Brown and Hesketh (2004, p. 96), employers realize that self-presentational skills are the building blocks of employability and depend on a repertoire of social skills, including "posture, gesture, use of personal space, facial characteristics and eye contact" during interviews and meetings (Warhurst & Nickson, 2001). A survey of the top 222 UK graduate recruiters revealed that (a) employers focus on "soft skills" (e.g., team work, interpersonal skills, and cultural awareness) more than academic credentials, and (b) there are not enough graduates with adequate interpersonal skills to fill the jobs that are available (The Guardian, 2006).

Hogan, Lock, and Brinkmeyer (1997) note that interpersonal skill involves being rewarding to deal with (cf. Argyle, 1967; Hogan & Shelton, 1998). In a sample of employed adults ($N=300$) from a variety of occupations, they gathered 300 critical incidents of rewarding and 300 incidents of aversive behaviors at work. They content analyzed the incidents and identified seven dimensions of interpersonal skill that can be reliably rated. Further analyses suggested the presence of one "super factor," which the authors labeled "Sensitivity to Others." This factor, which clarifies what it means to be rewarding to deal with at work, consists of understanding others' intentions during interaction, attending to/anticipating/meeting their needs, respecting their wishes, and projecting courtesy and friendliness—in short, being considerate and well mannered.

Fugate et al. (2004) argue that employability depends on certain discrete competencies. Although their model is theoretical, their claim is important—that is, employability depends on identifiable personal characteristics that can be assessed and possibly trained. Smith (2010) describes

the emergence of job search clubs that train employability. These clubs focus on enhancing impression management skills and "the linguistic aptitudes, norms for presentation of self, and interactional styles that are specific to different occupational and professional environments" (Smith, 2010, p. 284). Job search clubs teach members "to avoid the stark language of 'unemployment' ... and use the obfuscating, free agent language of being 'in transition' or 'between gigs' ... they [devote] vast amounts of time to ... role playing ... learning new ways of interacting with potential employers, and how to suppress purportedly negative and self-defeating aspects of their personalities that might reveal them as anything but a liberated new economy worker" (Smith, 2010, p. 286).

Van der Heijde and Van der Heijden (2006) proposed that employability is a syndrome with five measureable components (we interpret their components based on the content of the items they used to assess them): (a) "occupational expertise," which concerns competence at one's job; (b) "anticipation," which relates to ambition (again, based on the content of the items); (c) "personal flexibility," which is a combination of high Openness, Conscientiousness, and adjustment (Costa & McCrae, 1992); (d) "corporate sense," which is the disposition to behave in a socially desirable manner; and (e) "balance," a measure of work-life proportionality. Van der Heijde and Van der Heijden (2006) then asked 314 non-entry level employees in a Dutch manufacturing firm to complete their (five scale) employability measure. Criterion variables included number of promotions, income, and total time unemployed in the entire career. Occupational expertise predicted income, anticipation (ambition) predicted promotions, income, and unemployment; personal flexibility (Openness, Conscientiousness, and adjustment) predicted promotions and income; balance predicted income; and corporate sense (social desirability) predicted everything—promotions, income, and unemployment. The best predictor of

employability in this study was corporate sense—the ability to put on a socially desirable performance at work ($r = .32$ with promotions and $r = .47$ with income). Once again, then, employability seems to be more a function of a particular interpersonal style as reflected in the corporate sense measure (getting along with coworkers) than of ability or experience.

Studies of career failure lead to similar conclusions. McCall and Lombardo (1983) popularized the term “derailment” in their studies of executives who were fired. Decades of subsequent research confirm their original findings. Derailed executives resemble successful executives—they are smart, well-educated, experienced, hard-working, and have a track record of success. However, derailed executives are more likely to have an abrasive interpersonal style and a history of troubled relationships. Although executives are sometimes fired for poor results, the poor results typically provide a justification for removing difficult executives (Hogan, Hogan, & Kaiser, 2010).

Among the unemployed, some gain work more quickly than others, and their characteristics can be identified. In a study of unemployed German workers, Gallo, Endrass, Bradley, Hall, and Kash (2003) report that those with high scores for internal locus of control (i.e., high adjustment/low neuroticism) searched harder for employment and were more likely to become reemployed than those with low scores. Similarly, Caliendo, Cobb-Clark, and Uhlendorff (2010), in a study of unemployed U.S. workers, found that a one standard deviation increase in internal locus of control was associated with a 5.3% increase in number of job applications submitted, controlling for demographics and employment history. Finally, in another sample of unemployed U.S. workers, McGee (2010) found that a one standard deviation increase in internal locus of control was associated with a 20% increase in time spent searching for work. Because locus of control (high adjustment/low Neuroticism) is saturated with socially desirable behavior (cf. Uziel, 2010), these results further show how an

agreeable interpersonal style is associated with employability.

In summary, the literature on what employers want in job candidates highlights the importance of social skill and being rewarding to deal with. This differs from I–O psychology’s emphasis on cognitive ability and education for career success, and may explain why Emotional Intelligence and other scientifically suspect measures of social skill are popular in business (Murphy, 2006). Moreover, the gap between what psychologists recommend and what employers want suggests directions for research that can inform the question of employability and guide policy for dealing with widespread unemployment, the topic to which we now turn.

Conceptual issues in the Study of Employability and Career Success

This review concerns the psychological characteristics needed to gain and maintain employment in an organization. In the preceding sections we examined the empirical literature on (a) career success and (b) what employers want in employees. In our view, the discrepancy between what psychologists prescribe and what employers want concerns interpersonal or social skills, which seem to be valued more in the world of employment than in personnel selection and career success research. This disconnect may in part reflect two recent and fundamental changes in the nature of work. First, jobs are becoming less formal, structured, and routine; and second, jobs increasingly require working collaboratively with colleagues from different cultural, educational, and technical backgrounds (National Research Council, 2001). This shifts the demand from being able to perform a particular collection of tasks to being able to work cooperatively with others.

Regardless of the reason for the increased emphasis on interpersonal skills, it raises four interesting points. The first concerns “the criterion problem”—that is, the fact that performance evaluations do not

adequately represent job performance. Hiring decisions and performance appraisals reflect evaluations made by hiring and operational managers. Hiring decisions allegedly concern how well applicants fit the requirements or competency profile for a job, and performance evaluations allegedly depend on job performance. Our experience is consistent with the research literature (see Murphy, 2008) and suggests that these decisions are typically less rational than one might hope. For example, several years ago we developed a sales selection process for a large logistics firm. We tested the national sales force (about 300 people) and gathered revenue data for them, which we corrected for the size of the market in which the person worked. We then developed an index of job performance based on ratings from three sources: (a) the terminal manager where the sales person worked, (b) the regional sales manager, and (c) the national sales manager. These ratings correlated about .80, indicating reasonable agreement about each person's performance. However, performance ratings were uncorrelated with sales revenue; instead, performance ratings were most highly correlated with an index of how well the salespeople completed their paper work. The point is that criterion data in employment research are usually contaminated by politics (Mintzberg, 1985) and that the profiles of high performers are necessarily profiles of successful political actors who are also doing their jobs at least adequately.

The second point concerns the interesting finding reported by Boudreau, Boswell, and Judge (2001) that ratings for "employability" during the hiring process predict compensation levels after people are on the job. This suggests that both hiring managers and the managers who make compensation decisions respond to similar characteristics of employees, which by definition are something other than pure job performance. Thus, biases in the selection process seem to overlap with biases in job performance evaluations (e.g., supervisors may reward the same attributes that are valued in an interview, even if the attributes

don't contribute to better performance). This tendency may enhance validity coefficients but obscure the influence of biases. Furthermore, some biases may be functional and desirable—such as those concerning citizenship behavior or extra-role performance—whereas other biases may be irrelevant or undesirable—such as the effects for height, attractiveness, gender, or race.

The third point concerns the study by Van der Heijde and Van der Heijden (2006), which shows that the essence of employability is socially desirable behavior during the hiring process—and by extension on the job. Scores on their measure of social desirability—which they called "corporate sense"—predicted promotions, income, and time spent unemployed. This suggests an important link between employability and career success; the link concerns the ability to put on a socially desirable performance during hiring interviews and social interaction at work.

The fourth point concerns the definition of socially desirable behavior. The literature contains three definitions. The first defines socially desirable behavior as faking (Edwards, 1957)—where faking involves "not being yourself." This definition assumes that people have internal, accessible models of their true selves that guide their behavior. They also have internal rulers that they use to measure how much their overt behavior departs from their true selves. Faking involves self-consciously behaving in ways that deviate from a prescribed limit. This definition assumes the existence of several psychic mechanisms (true selves, deviance detection devices, intentions to deceive) that, in principle, can't be observed; more importantly, no modern self-concept researchers would endorse this model—compare Leary and Tangney (in press). In addition, Uziel (2010) shows that socially desirable behavior is related to social effectiveness and not faking, which indicates that socially desirable behavior is valid variance. The second definition of social desirability is in terms of a profile on the FFM. Steenkamp, de

Jong, and Baumgartner (2010) summarize the research regarding the relationships between social desirability and the dimensions of the FFM (p. 203, table 3). As they note, individual differences in the tendency to respond to questions (behave) in a socially desirable fashion correlate .46 with “Emotional Stability,” .32 with “Conscientiousness,” .26 with “Extraversion,” .13 with “Openness,” and .10 with “Agreeableness.” Thus, socially desirable behavior is positively correlated with every facet of the “bright side” of personality and is, therefore, somewhat attractive. The third definition (Hogan & Shelton, 1998) views socially desirable behavior as a particular kind of role performance, one that is designed to allow people to fit in and get along with the others with whom they must interact. Although the evidence suggests that socially desirable role performance is associated with a wide range of positive career outcomes, many bright people seem unable or unwilling to behave this way.

The importance of socially desirable behavior depends on context. For example, a talented renegade manager may be tolerated in a logistics company but not in a human services organization. The reason has to do with organizational culture (Ravasi & Schultz, 2006; Schein, 1992). Research shows that the congruence between an employee’s and an organization’s values significantly impacts performance and career outcomes (Arthur, Bell, Villado, & Doverspike, 2006; Hoffman & Woehr, 2006; Verquer, Beehr, & Wagner, 2003).

An Integrative Model of Employability

In our view, both career success and employability depend on behaving in socially desirable ways, especially when interacting with recruiters, employers, and managers. The ability to do this depends on a surprisingly small set of competencies, namely seeming (a) interpersonally skilled, (b) smart or able, and (c) compliant (National Research Council, 2011, p. 2).

Recall that job performance is primarily defined by supervisors’ ratings. In very general terms, supervisors like employees who are likeable. In addition, they favor employees who seem to learn quickly and show good judgment—and this helps explain the consistent correlations between cognitive ability and job performance (Kuncel et al. 2010). Supervisors also like employees who seem compliant, obedient, and conforming—and this helps explain the consistent correlations between measures of Conscientiousness and job performance (Chamorro-Premuzic & Furnham, 2010). These observations also account for the positive manifold between personality, cognitive ability, educational performance, and job performance. Teachers are *de facto* supervisors (they supervise student performance); like all supervisors, they favor student/subordinates who seem smart, attentive, pliable, and conforming, and such students tend to receive higher grades.

The set of attributes that combine to make people employable (or successful in their careers) also explains why some high IQ people are unemployable. Unemployable people are irritable, challenging, and disputatious—not rewarding to deal with; they also display bad judgment; still others are stubborn, nonconforming, and insubordinate. Unemployability, therefore, is a composite of irritability/rudeness, social insensitivity, and incompetence, which explains the links between dark side personality traits and counterproductive work behavior (O’Boyle, Forsyth, Banks, & McDaniel, 2012).

We believe that employability is an *attri-bution* employers make about the probability that job candidates will make positive contributions to their organizations. Psychologists interested in employability should therefore investigate the determinants of employers’ perceptions of employability. The essential question is as follows: What determines whether a person will be perceived as having the potential to contribute positively to an organization? We believe the answer is whether the person is (a) rewarding to deal with—*rewarding*;

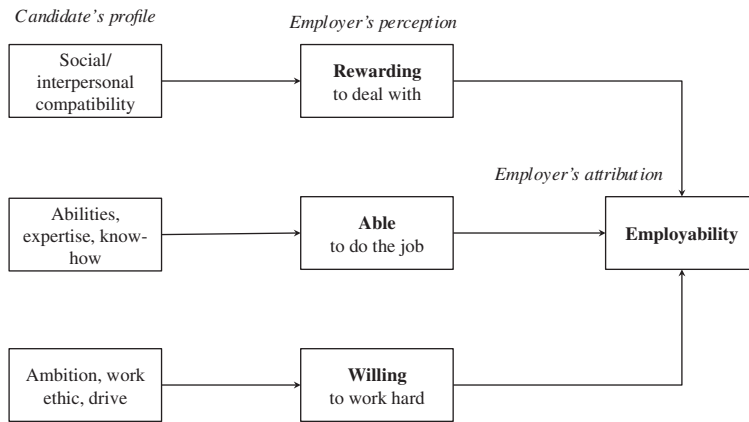


Figure 1. Determinants of employability.

(b) capable of learning and performing the job—*able*; and (c) driven and hard working—*willing* (see Figure 1). Thus, employers' ratings of a candidate's employability will be a function of (a) interpersonal skill (Lievens & Sackett, 2012) and compatibility with the values of the organization, team, or management (Edwards & Cable, 2009); (b) ability, know-how, and expertise (Schmidt, Hunter, & Outerbridge, 1986); and (c) ambition, drive, and work ethic (Hogan & Chamorro-Premuzic, in press).

Two implications of Figure 1 should be mentioned. First, the traditional focus of I–O selection research has concerned the fit of applicants with the demands of jobs. In addition, the entire thrust of labor law as it applies to defending selection procedures has maintained that selection procedures must be demonstrably job related. In contrast, we believe employers mostly want to know if new hires will fit with the organization—employees who don't fit will tend not to work hard and leave, even if they can do the job well (Edwards & Cable, 2009); poor fit is also associated with lower job satisfaction, which decreases task performance (Arthur et al., 2006; Hoffman & Woehr, 2006) and increases counterproductive work behaviors (Mount, Ilies, & Johnson, 2006). Justifying selection procedures based on fit will require a different line of defense from job relevance; it will necessarily depend more on the contextual

performance and organizational citizenship literature. On the other hand, the fact that well-validated measures of personality do not yield adverse impact against women, older workers, and minorities (Chamorro-Premuzic & Furnham, 2010) suggests there may be fewer sustainable complaints in the future compared to selection procedures based on measures of cognitive ability.

Second, we think this **rewarding/ability/willingness (RAW) model is inherently compensatory**. Thus, employees with only average ability may succeed by being rewarding and productive; bright people with limited social skills may succeed by being very productive; those who are charming, bright, and lazy will succeed as they always do. But candidates who “tick all three boxes” should have higher levels of career success; candidates who are strong in two of the three areas should do well; those who are strong in only one can expect occasional unemployment; those who are weak in all three may be unemployable.

Reframing occupational research in terms of employability opens directions for research that can better inform public policy decisions as well as help the unemployed improve their chances of obtaining a job. In particular, we see four basic research directions.

The first concerns the determinants of employers' perceptions of employability—

being seen as (a) rewarding to deal with, (b) able to get work done, and (c) willing to work hard. It would be useful to study the importance to employers of the three categories that would define their priority in terms of employability training. For example, unrewarding people with an extraordinary work ethic can be trained in social skills and placed in jobs where interaction skills are less relevant—, for example, virtual work groups. People who are highly able but unwilling to work hard may require extra incentives or special management strategies; and those who are less able may compensate by working hard or being rewarding to deal with.

A second question concerns our claim that being rewarding to deal with is an important part of employability. Recent research on workplace civility and citizenship and, conversely, on rudeness, bullying, and antisocial behavior, suggests that the need for social skill may be increasing (Porath & Erez, 2007; Sutton, 2007). Research can document the need for interpersonal skill in job training and other educational efforts (Lievens & Sackett, 2012). Historically, training initiatives have focused on technical, not social, skills (Brown & Hesketh, 2004), and as the economy shifts to services, team-based structures, and an increasingly networked workplace, this will probably also need to change.

A third area of research concerns the shared bias that affects selection decisions and performance appraisals. Supervisors' ratings of job performance are minimally related to actual job performance (Murphy, 2008) but significantly related to candidate screening evaluations in the hiring process. Research can identify the factors contributing to this effect that are also related to organizational effectiveness and the mechanisms through which these factors operate, such as contextual performance and organizational citizenship, as opposed to factors that are associated with unfair discrimination and unrelated to employee or organizational performance. Such studies could improve the fairness of selection procedures

and level the playing field that seems to put women and ethnic minorities at a disadvantage.

Finally, there may be a dark side to maximizing employees' ability to get along, fit in, and be productive. For example, if the selection process emphasizes ability and work ethic, the staffing outcome may be a workforce that competes internally, becomes overly consumed with the work, and burns out. On the other hand, emphasizing rewardingness may create a workforce that is conflict averse and puts political correctness above performance. The same goes for staffing strategies that emphasize fit between employees' and organizational values: It can lead to a homogenous workforce that is unable to adapt, change, or maintain constructive conflict.

Summary and Conclusions

The inexorable automation of work processes, the rise of service industries, the tendency to outsource jobs, and the constant pressure to cut costs have combined to change, probably forever, the nature of employment in the developed world. Employers no longer need bodies that can fog mirrors; for the vast majority of jobs they can afford to be selective, and this makes the job search process more competitive than perhaps ever in modern economic history (Brown & Hesketh, 2004). Employability, defined as the ability to gain and retain employment (including finding new employment when necessary), has become a public policy issue, and it is a issue to which applied psychologists are uniquely qualified to contribute.

But being able to contribute to public policy discussions requires that psychologists adjust their typical focus. Historically, they have told employers what they *should* look for in employees. The data suggest, however, that employers are no longer listening. Psychologists might consider expanding their research to include what it is that employers actually want in new hires. Answers to this question

have important implications for recruitment, selection, training, outplacement, management practices, and the entire employee life cycle. However, our sense is that I–O psychologists often fall into the technical expert trap—that is, convinced that they are uniquely qualified to determine what employers need, they ignore what employer say they need. This attitude can focus research in the wrong direction, produce irrelevant advice, and widen the gap between the theory and reality of what is needed to find and maintain employment.

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