



FOOD FOR THOUGHT

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Career Development:
Employability Dimensions

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Within the career development domain there are many different issues that can be raised by people as they seek to come to terms with how to best incorporate work into their lives. These issues seemed to revolve around several different themes and Human Resources Development Canada (HRDC) has established a four dimensional employability framework as a basis for understanding and working with the different issues (Patsula, 1992).

HRDC Employability Framework

The themes that were developed by HRDC were as follows: career exploration; skill enhancement; job search enhancement and job/work maintenance. It was anticipated that these broad categories would include most of the issues that clients were facing. A description of each of the categories follows:

1. **Career exploration** – This category focuses on many of the concerns that face young people as they seek to determine what particular career field they should enter. It also has relevance for people in working life, particularly when they experience some dissatisfaction with how their work life is progressing. This category focuses on the “big issues” of purpose and meaning in life. It also is the domain where people try to better understand their own personal skills, interests, values and personality. Armed with increased self-awareness people can then look at various occupational fields and try to determine how to make the best fit. In career exploration there is a focus on both the person and the occupation, and an attempt to determine the best way to bring the personal and the occupational variables together.
2. **Skill enhancement** – Once people have some idea of what career area they would like to get into, they need to develop vocational and interpersonal skills so that they can be successful within their chosen occupational field. This skill enhancement can come in many different forms. For many people, it is a matter of entering formal training through the trades, colleges or universities. Others seek training and skill development through participation in voluntary activities. There also is much informal skill development that occurs within organizations and through mentoring and coaching relationships. Skill enhancement provides people with the necessary skills and qualifications to enter working life.
3. **Job Search Enhancement** – There are various strategies and skills necessary for looking for work whether it involves part time, contract work or a full time position. These skills include resume preparation, occupational research, cold calls, networking, interviewing, and in some cases, proposal writing. The particular skill set necessary for looking for work changes over time and people need to be prepared to update their job search skills to meet changing labour market demands.
4. **Job / Work Maintenance** – Finding work is an important starting point. It also is a time when people have to apply their interpersonal and vocational skills in a manner that allows them to be successful within the work place. Some people are very good at finding jobs but have more difficulty keeping them for any length of time. There are certain skills and attitudes that need to be applied in the workplace to ensure continuity.



Using the HRDC Framework for Group Needs Assessment

The employability framework developed by HRDC has provided a useful template for practitioners working within the career development field. In working with these themes within a group needs assessment context (Starting Points) a roadmap model was developed to illustrate the ways in which people move through the career development process (Westwood, Amundson & Borgen, 1994). Each theme included roadblocks (challenges) and stopovers (areas of development) and there was the recognition that people could focus on more than one theme at any given time. Clients were encouraged to use the various themes as a way to organize their concerns and to consider new possibilities.

When the employability dimensions were used with social assistance clients there was a recognition that a new theme area needed to be added at the beginning – a fifth employability dimension (Borgen, 1995). Many clients had difficulty with basic issues of employment readiness and **resources**. For some it was alcohol and drug abuse, others faced mental health challenges, some had difficulty with child care and other poverty related issues. There was the recognition that community resources outside of the traditional employment service might be needed to ensure a basic level of readiness. To meet the needs of clients it was necessary to offer a more integrated level of employment service with access to community resources. This shift to five employability dimensions helped to broaden the scope of career development service.

Career Development Trends

Some of the current challenges within the career development field suggest that more changes to the employability dimension structure might be needed. There is a movement to link more closely occupational and organizational career counselling (Amundson, Parker & Arthur, 2002). From this perspective there is the recognition that career development is something that extends over the lifespan and requires greater personal investment in shaping career development. This self-organizing activity is based on past experience but also has a strong focus on future possibilities. The need for greater self-reliance in career planning is due to the changing nature of the labour market. People find themselves facing a growing number of changes with less assurance from employers about security and career direction (Herr, 1999; Feller, 2003). Within this increasingly complex situation people need to formulate new career development strategies. Terms such as 'boundaryless' (Arthur & Rousseau, 1996), 'portfolio' (Handy, 1990) or 'protean' (Hall 1996) have been used to define this new form of career involvement.

A New Employability Dimension

While the current schema of employability dimensions includes a category called job / work maintenance, it is clear that what is being discussed in the recent career literature goes far beyond what currently exists. As a response to this shortcoming, I would like to suggest the term "**career growth**" as a new employability dimension (the sixth theme area – placed after job / work maintenance. With this addition there would be clear recognition of the need to focus on issues of career movement and change. This growth could be within a particular job or occupational field or it might be broader and encompass the desire to change fields entirely. Career growth would involve systematic planning but it would also allow for unexpected changes and opportunities. The focus here would be on transferability of skills and attitudes and the desire to approach change in a manner consistent with what Gelatt (1989) describes as "positive uncertainty".



Implications

The choice of a metaphor as this additional employability dimension is helpful in that it can easily be incorporated into career practice (Inkson & Amundson, 2002). If growth is the metaphor then clients can be challenged with the task of growing their own career garden. In this garden they would need to research and select the best types of plants (a portfolio approach). They would also need to provide good soil and nourishment for what they intended to grow. There are many metaphoric possibilities that one could work with to develop awareness of this particular dimension.

The addition of another employability dimension also has implications for those involved in policy development. By focusing on career growth there would be the assumption that services would be provided to a broader range of people. Career development would be a service that would extend into the workplace and be available for people as they created work (entrepreneurial actions) and / or moved in and out of jobs over the lifespan. This broader view of career development service would require changes in mandate and the development of career services that would better reflect this new reality.

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