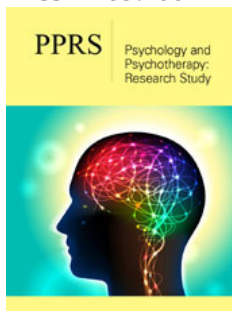


Bridging the Workforce Employability Gap: Essential Skills Across Education Levels

ISSN: 2639-0612



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Abstract

This review examines the crucial link between employability and essential skills in the modern job market, highlighting the importance of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) for equitable access to these skills. Employability relies on the mastery of essential skills, spanning a wide array of competencies that extend beyond mere technical proficiency. Disparities emerge when assumptions about career readiness and success fail to consider the diversity of backgrounds and educational experiences. Bridging these gaps requires collaborative efforts among stakeholders to tackle issues surrounding the development of essential skills across educational levels to prepare the future workforce.

Keywords: Essential skills; Soft skills; Employability; DEI; Education; Career readiness

Abbreviations: DEI: Diversity Equity and Inclusion

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Submission:  March 03, 2024

Published:  May 03, 2024

Volume 8 - Issue 1

How to cite this article: Stephanie Tavarez* and Laura G Chacon-Marmolejos. Bridging the Workforce Employability Gap: Essential Skills Across Education Levels. *Psychol Psychother Res Stud.* 8(1). PPRS. 000678. 2024.
DOI: [10.31031/PPRS.2024.08.000678](https://doi.org/10.31031/PPRS.2024.08.000678)

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Introduction

In today's rapidly evolving job market, the mastery of essential skills stands as a fundamental pillar of employability. Employability is a concept that encompasses a range of skills, knowledge, and personal attributes that professionals possess, making them competitive candidates for employers seeking to fill positions [1-4]. Beyond mere qualifications, employability embodies an integrated approach to career readiness, and it emphasizes not only what professionals know but also how they apply their knowledge, communicate, and navigate the complexities of the workplace. Employability is not merely a desirable trait but now, a necessity for professionals looking to thrive in an environment characterized by technological advancements, globalization and shifting industry landscapes. Yet, access to learning these essential skills is not equal across different segments of society, hindering the career prospects and progression of many individuals. This review aims to highlight the critical link between essential skills and employability, and the significant influence that Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) have in promoting equitable access to these vital skills.

The Role of Essential Skills and DEI in Employment

Education, whether formal or informal, provides the foundation of knowledge and skills necessary for individuals to enter the job market. However, it's important to note that traditional education often places a significant emphasis on the technical aspects of a job, such as specific technical skills and domain knowledge, while sometimes overlooking the equally crucial intangible skills needed for success in the workforce. While technical skills are undoubtedly important, employability and career success also hinge on intangible skills [1]. These intangible skills are referred to as essential skills in addition to soft or interpersonal skills [5-9]. They include communication, problem-solving, critical thinking, adaptability, teamwork, leadership, emotional intelligence, and cultural competency, among others [9]. Essential skills encompass a broader understanding of the critical competencies required for success in the workplace. This terminology shift recognizes that these skills are not

merely “soft” or secondary but are fundamental and essential for individuals to excel in their careers.

Employability development is a lifelong journey that begins with our life experiences and the resources at our disposal, all of which contribute to our readiness for the workforce [5]. Life experiences include cultural factors that impact how employability is perceived and utilized in the context of job security and work-related outcomes [7]. This journey doesn't commence solely with the transition into one's initial career but rather takes root from an early age and continues throughout an individual's career trajectory [2]. As we delve deeper into the dynamics of employability development, it becomes evident that it is not a solo endeavour but a collective effort involving educational institutions, organizations, and individuals themselves. Educational institutions play a vital role in equipping students with both technical knowledge and essential skills, while employers provide the real-world context for honing these skills [8].

Many employers assume that individuals naturally possess these essential skills when they enter the workforce, but the reality is often quite different. People that come from diverse backgrounds and educational experiences can result in varying levels of proficiency in essential skills; the assumption that everyone has these skills can lead to significant disparities in the workplace [6]. When individuals from certain backgrounds face barriers to accessing fundamental resources, it creates a cycle of disadvantages [3]. For example, the lack of access to quality education can limit employment opportunities, which in turn impacts income and the ability to invest in further education and sustain their livelihood.

Understanding the intersection between employability, essential skills, and DEI is crucial for bridging the gaps between career readiness and success. Particularly, the access of essential skills at all educational levels (i.e., early childhood, primary, secondary, vocational and higher education) to better equip the next generation for the current labour market. Addressing this gap requires a collaborative effort involving multiple stakeholders, such as professionals, educators, organizational leaders, and researchers to answer the following questions

- A. Access: What aspects of our background (i.e., geography, environment, family, education) impact initial employability and early career? Why?
- B. Content: What are the essential skills needed for success in the modern workforce at each educational level? Why?
- C. Approach: What approach to teaching essential skills will yield the greatest transfer?

D. Fields: In which fields (i.e., psychology data science, engineering, finance, etc.) will essential skills training be most important? Which fields should be prioritized and how?

E. Roadblock: What barriers exist that hinder individuals from acquiring these essential skills? How can these barriers be overcome?

Conclusion

In summary, employability development is not an individual endeavour but a collaborative effort that necessitates active participation, starting early in essential skills development as an investment in lifelong growth and well-being. The earlier one starts to develop essential skills, the more time, and opportunities to build a strong foundation, integrate these skills into one's daily life, and position oneself for success in education, work, and personal relationships.

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