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## **EMPLOYABILITY: "THE BIG E" OF THE EDUCATION AND BUSINESS INTERFACE**

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The spotlight of this discussion paper is on how well learner-workers should be able to live within their worlds of education and business. Key questions which may in turn translate to guiding principles are:

- Are learner-workers given appropriate choices?
- Are they provided with the tools they need to make genuinely informed choices?
- Do they benefit from advocacy by all players in their sets of circumstances?
- Are they provided with access to opportunities?
- Are they aware, through publicity, of the opportunities?
- Do they and should they receive prepaid tuition?
- Are institutional barriers and disincentives removed from their paths?
- Is their prior learning recognised?
- Are they provided with workplace support systems?
- Are goals and values established and maintained?

A focal point for the discussion is the concept of "employability", or "employment security", which has been defined in an influential American study as "being qualified for currently available work, whether with a present employer or elsewhere" (Sheckley, Lamdin and Keeton 1993, p. 4). The relevance of the American findings to the New Zealand context will be considered and partnership opportunities explored. It will be argued that the employability concept (which is not to be confused with job security) is crucial to the well-being of our learner-workers.

### **Why "employability"? Why the "learner-worker"**

It is well recognised that we're living in a world of accelerating change. Indeed, that has been recognised for some time (Toffler 1980). No longer can we sit back and take life as it comes. No longer is it business as usual. We need to anticipate. We need to be proactive. We need to be opportunistic. Such behavioural characteristics apply to organisations just as much as they do to individuals. The "total quality organisation" has evolved as the "learning organisation" which in turn is evolving as the "world-class organisation" (Hodgetts, Luthans and Lee 1994).

In this increasingly dynamic environment lifelong learning has become a must for workers. The knowledge and skills of yesterday are not the knowledge and skills of today. Today's abilities will not be the abilities that are required tomorrow. It's worth reflecting on the fact that the personal computer has been with us for only 20 years and has become an item on virtually every office desk in only the last 10 years. It seems like it's been with us forever. How many males, in particular, had keyboard skills 15 years ago? How many knowledge workers of whatever type don't have them now? Will such skills be important in 15 years? Or in five?

That all points to the significance of the “The Big E” - employability. Increasingly, we’re taking on new roles and jobs. No longer do we expect to receive a gold watch as recognition of loyalty after 20 years’ service in the one company. We need to upskill. We need to relearn. We need to anticipate. We need to be learner-workers on a continuing basis.

### **Are learner-workers given appropriate choices?**

What sorts of choices do we need and want as learner-workers? There’s a wide range of topics. How do we select from them? There’s a variety of learning approaches. How do we establish our preferences? There’s a variety of assessment options. How can we negotiate the one or ones that we want?

What sorts of choices do other parties want learner-workers to need and want? There is evidence that employers want employees who:

- know how to learn;
- can read, write, compute and communicate in a variety of ways;
- can think critically and creatively;
- can solve problems;
- can work alone;
- can work in teams; and
- can provide leadership.

(Sheckley, Lamdin and Keeton 1993)

There’s also evidence that they want employees who are motivated and have good attitudes to work (Tapsell 2000, quoting Sir Christopher Ball).

As far as government is concerned, there are “initiatives” from time to time aimed at directing students into perceived-need disciplines. Science used to be seen as a need. Technology is being pushed at present. Entrepreneurial activities are being encouraged. Have they been appropriate? Are they appropriate? What will be next? Have we any idea?

How tuned in to the choices needed by learner-workers are educational institutions? Some seem to be consumed by profit motives, others by “mile wide, inch deep” approaches, yet others by orientations so traditional that they appear to have retreated behind their ivy-covered walls, and some by strange or not-so-strange combinations of the others. In other words there are “mercenaries”, “missionaries”, “misfits” and “mutants” in the field of tertiary education (Hornblow 1997). Do they provide what is needed individually? Perhaps in some instances. Probably not in most. Can they provide what is needed in combination? Maybe.

Of crucial importance is conversation involving the learner-worker and other parties. As stated by Sheckley, Lamdin and Keeton (1993, p. 157):

For a learning programme to succeed, the learner’s motivation and persistence in pursuing it are crucial. To keep motivation and persistence high, the learner must have an active role in deciding what to learn and why; be involved in the choice of provider, scheduling, and other key questions; and, finally, understand what the other stakeholders have to gain from his or her participation.

## **Are learner-workers provided with the tools they need to make genuinely informed choices?**

What sorts of tools are likely to satisfy the needs of learner-workers?

“Returning to Learning” workshops have proved successful in the United States (Sheckley, Lamdin and Keeton 1993, pp. 159-160). Run by the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL), for example, and involving partnerships of groups such as the Ford motor company, the United Auto Workers (UAW) union, and University Options Program (CUOP), the workshops have enabled participants to explore topics such as:

- Self-assessment;
- The economic context in which they are functioning;
- Ways to choose the right provider;
- How colleges and other schools operate;
- The concept of adults as nonstop, self-managing learners; and
- Ways adults survive in school.

Essentially the aim is to provide learner-workers with “information about their own needs, aptitudes, skills and values; current changes in the national and local job markets and in the prospects for continued work with their current employer; and the structures and resources of the various education institutions” (Sheckley, Lamdin, and Keeton 1993, p. 159). Similar programmes have been run in the United Kingdom under the banner of the Learning from Experience Trust (LET) (Evans 1989).

In terms of the actual involvement of learner-workers in educational and training programmes, the application of a flexible learning and assessment model by tertiary institutions and employers is likely to be of great benefit. The steps of such a model might include pre-entry counselling, candidate profiling, consideration of learning and assessment options, decision on options, assessment, granting of credit (if appropriate), and consideration of new learning opportunities (Simosko 1991, Hornblow 1997). Key questions arising from the application of the model include:

- How can educational institutions and employers apply it in partnership?
- What other parties need to be involved?
- Who ensures that the interests of the learner-workers are protected?
- Who provides the counselling services?
- Who pays?

The answers probably lie in a situation-by-situation-based mix of assessment centres, “one stop shops”, broker-managers, loss leader approaches, and government assistance. The focus almost certainly needs to be on partnerships and consortia rather than ruthlessly competitive individual organisations. Surely it’s a matter of social rather than individual responsibility; of comprehensive rather than restricted entitlement.

## **Do Learner-workers benefit, in their sets of circumstances, from advocacy by all players?**

Who are the players? Employers, unions, government, trainers and educationists are among them. Are there others? Well, the learner-workers themselves, of

course. They're not to be forgotten. They are likely to have suspicions that need to be eased. If an employability programme is being driven by an employer, the chances are the employee will be wrestling with questions such as "Why have they chosen me?", "What's in it for them?", "What's in it for me?", "Are they really trying to improve my situation?", "Or are they trying to get rid of me?"

Different types of advocacy will be appropriate from different types of players? Employers should be giving an honest depiction of the working world; unions should have pragmatic perspectives of a radically-changing present and future as well as a conservative past; government should provide a longer than short-term viewpoint; and educationists and trainers should surely offer collaborative rather than competitive options.

What are examples of "sets of circumstances"? The motivated school leaver has her or his special set. Also, the less-than-motivated school leaver has hers or his. Then there's the mother returning to the workforce. And the recently redundant worker. And many others, each with their sets of circumstances. All should be considered and acted upon with empathy?

What benefits apply to employers, government, and education providers? They need to have them firmly in mind if they are to be committed participants. For employers, there is the ability to move people more easily in and out of their workforces and hence maintain appropriate mixes of knowledge, skills, attitudes and values in an ongoing, dynamic way. Further, with an eye to the "bottom line", costs such as those relating to rising disability and early retirement can be minimised (Sheckley, Lamdin and Keeton 1993, p. 32). For the government there are better-educated citizens, a prosperous economy, a higher tax base, and lower costs in terms of unemployment, welfare, and poverty-related and crime-related social services (op. cit., p. 86.) For education providers, there are increased enrolments of students who bring life and work experiences to campus classroom discussions, funding for students who otherwise need financial aid, financial rewards from cooperative programmes with the various other vested-interest parties, opportunity to serve taxpayers better and enhance ties to the community, opportunity for faculty and staff development, opportunities for research partnerships and exchange of resources with new partners, and impetus to update curricula and add new offerings (op. cit., p. 62).

Crucially, what benefits apply to the learner-workers? Appropriate placement as a full-time or part-time student? A passport to the future? Options? Opportunity? Opportunism? Sheckley, Lamdin and Keeton (1993, p. 50) point to "employment security, improved compensation over time, more fulfilling work, prepaid tuition paid by employers, career planning services, support services by joint venture staff, growth in intellectual complexity and maturity, rise in self-esteem, and a role model for children".

### **Are learner-workers provided with access to opportunities?**

Historically, figures have indicated that the education and training dollars of employers have been allocated disproportionately to managerial workers in relation to non-managerial workers. Tan (1988, cited in Vaughn and Berryman 1989) found that only 34 percent of training dollars went to non-tertiary-educated workers despite the fact that they constituted the great majority of the United States workforce. In consequence the ability of the United States workforce to adapt to change was greatly impeded.

One way or another all employees should have access to employability programmes. Various types of educational providers - "mercenaries", "missionaries", "mutants" and even "misfits" - can have a part to play as consortia and partners (Hornblow 1997).

What are some of the ways in which access can be provided? Sponsored programmes, work placement, and transition schemes are among the possibilities.

### **Are learner-workers aware, through publicity, of the opportunities?**

Are they? Is there evidence that they are? Certainly, there's evidence that some aren't.

Do employers provide or facilitate the provision of, for example, notices on bulletin boards, stories in employee-read newsletters, personal letters, informal chats, and union-sanctioned and union-delivered communications.

What are examples of publicity that could be used by education providers? Advertising on public transport has been known to work. A "You may be a PhD but don't know it!" poster on underground commuter trains has proved effective in leading candidates to an American university. Events centres might be the places to get appropriate messages across. Radio and television. The Internet. What works nowadays? Will it work tomorrow?

### **Do they and should they receive prepaid tuition?**

Do they? Is there evidence that they do? There's evidence from many organisations that they don't provide prepaid tuition. Historically, it has been New Zealand public service policy to reimburse and not prepay. The private sector has been little different.

Should organisations provide it? Is there evidence that prepaid tuition gets better results than postpaid tuition or no payment at all? Indeed, there is compelling evidence from the United States that prepaid tuition is the key to involving high numbers of workers in employability programmes. For example, in a Mountain Bell-union partnered "Pathways to the Future Programme", fewer than 25 percent of non-management staff used a reimbursement programme but almost 80 percent of them used prepaid tuition (Greenberg 1990). As stated by Sheckley, Lamdin and Keeton 1993, p. 166) in relation to this and similar programmes:

Moreover, employers' fears about having to pay for large numbers of course failures or dropouts have proved unfounded where the counsels and supports of an employability programme are also provided. Students who go to school under prepaid tuition plans apparently do not suffer any diminution of will to

succeed. In fact, their grades and rates of completion are slightly better than those of employees who must wait for reimbursement.

Are there examples of prepaid tuition programmes in New Zealand?

### **Are institutional barriers and disincentives removed from the paths of learner-workers?**

What sorts of barriers and disincentives do or might exist? Poorly designed forms are among them. Also, unnecessary forms. Are there still queues at enrolment times. Is the mature candidate forced to assemble against her or his will with irritatingly skittish, pimply-faced school-leavers? Is the uncertain candidate provided with little or no counselling? Are systems designed for the computer literate but not the computer illiterate? Is there evidence of rudeness on the part of administrators? Delays? Broken promises?

The problems go beyond the learner-workers themselves. Why don't corporations turn to education institutions for their training needs? According to Sheckley, Lamdin and Keeton (1993, p. 70), it is because of:

- slow response time;
- lack of flexibility;
- content and method that is inappropriate to adult learners;
- lack of up-to-date practical and technical information;
- difficulty in getting decisions made and approved in the academic bureaucracy;
- resistance to change;
- unfamiliarity with adult learners; and
- restricted range of services.

Is there evidence that barriers have been or are being removed? If yes, how? If no, how might they be removed? What are the options? Seeing things from the perspective of the candidates and learners is clearly important.

### **Is their prior learning recognised?**

What has happened to (Recognition of Prior Learning) RPL in New Zealand? It was strongly promoted by the New Zealand Qualifications Authority in the early 1990s as "a process for awarding credit for unit standards in the National Qualifications Framework where the outcomes have been achieved outside the Framework" (NZQA 1993, p. 4). Is it still alive and well? What are examples of good practice? Are candidates given opportunities for:

- *portfolio development*, where various items of prior evidence are readily available and may be assembled together in a suitable form for assessment (Gunn and McDougall 1992, p. 14; Hornblow 1994, p. 2);
- *challenge testing*, where evidence of prior learning is not so readily available but the candidate is able to demonstrate her or his competence on the spot (Gunn and McDougall 1992, p. 14);
- *interviewing*, which may complement portfolio development or challenge testing or stand on its own, particularly in instances where oral presentation by the interviewee, with opportunities for probing by the interviewer(s), is considered appropriate (Broadmeadows College of TAFE 1990, pp. 14-21); and

- *attestation*, where the assessment decision is delegated by a provider “to a person or group recognised by the selector as having sufficient depth and breadth of knowledge, and respect, to execute a fair, valid and consistent assessment” (NZQA 1993, p. 17).

Are the savings of time, money and effort that RPL brings to learner-workers, education providers, industry and government understood? Is the need for teachers to change their roles from fillers of empty vessels to facilitators of learning and esteem accepted?

### **Are learner-workers provided with workplace support systems?**

Yes? No? What are examples of good and bad practice? What is the role of the team leader in assisting learner-workers? Is coaching part of it? What is the role of the training manager? What is the role of the chief executive?

Importantly, there needs to be a learning culture in the organisation. The learner-worker needs to be supported by a “learning organisation” (Senge 1992). There needs to be a modern orientation to training, one that recognises diversity of opinions, attitudes, beliefs and values and in which there is a focus on:

- the learner-worker rather than the trainer;
- “people” rather than “human resources”;
- organisational goals and human needs rather than organisational goals alone;
- opportunities for all rather than elitism;
- a process of needs analysis, preparation of objectives, development of methodology, and implementation and evaluation of programmes, with feedback loops, rather than off-the-shelf packages;
- facilitation and negotiation rather than dictation and obligation;
- results and process rather than results or process alone;
- optimisation rather than maximisation of quality;
- technology as a means to an end;
- formal training as *a* method and not *the* method for addressing performance problems;
- individuals and teams rather than individuals alone;
- open rather than closed learning;
- holism rather than reductionism;
- lifelong learning and short-term needs rather than short-term needs alone;
- collaboration rather than competition; and
- employability rather than employment.

### **Are goals and values established and maintained?**

It is critical that employability programmes are run and supported by people who believe in the concept. Goals and values need to be owned and shared. All parties must be involved positively. Broker-managers - either as employees of an organisation or external agents - may well be important and necessary catalysts of such programmes. Things that broker-managers might be required to do are:

- Reach out to employers and unions to enlist partners.
- Co-design the programmes with other partners.

- Reach out to education and training providers to enlist them, develop capability matrices on them, and brief them on the specifics of participation, payment, etc.
- Reach out to employees to increase participation.
- Recruit and train provider liaisons.
- Recruit and train career and education counsellors for employees.
- Conduct monthly or quarterly meetings for coordination among providers.
- Manage specialised training workshops.
- Provide ongoing service to employees to approve career end education plans, issue letters of credit, approve providers, authorise disbursement of tuition and fee payments, and reimburse costs for books.
- Manage celebratory occasions to honour learners, providers, and other key participants.
- Gather, manage and analyse data.
- Evaluate programmes.
- Generate special programmes where requested.
- Provide general administration.

(Sheckley, Lamdin and Keeton 1993, p. 171)

### **How can the learner-workers' worlds of education and business best meet?**

There is an ongoing quest for appropriate policy, principles and practice in relation to employability in New Zealand and throughout the world. According to Sheckley, Lamdin and Keeton (1993, p. 10), there is a need for "a new infrastructure of policies and institutions" because:

- No one kind of partner alone can do the job;
- Once the policies are in place, we need a way to make them work;
- The field of education providers keeps changing; and
- The workforce will require constant retraining as some categories of enterprise fail and others replace them.

Are the American findings on employability relevant to the context "Down Under"? New Zealand with its relatively homogeneous population is in at least as strong a position as the United States to accept and apply the concept. This it can do from both social justice and economic perspectives. Essentially, it is a matter of having all key players - learner-workers, industry, unions, education providers and government - working collaboratively rather than competitively. Broker-managers can provide the catalysis.

Is it stretching the discussion too far to suggest that all of the questions that were asked at the beginning of this paper be accepted as guiding principles. Sheckley, Lamdin and Keeton (1993) have no doubt that they should be. The principles would be:

- Learner-workers should be given appropriate choices.
- They should be provided with the tools they need to make genuinely informed choices.
- They should benefit from advocacy by all key players.
- They should be provided with access to opportunities.
- They should be aware, through publicity, of the opportunities.
- They should receive prepaid tuition.
- Institutional barriers and disincentives should be removed from their paths.

- Their prior learning should be recognised.
- They should be provided with workplace support systems.
- Employability goals and values should be established and maintained by all key players.

Yes, “The Big E” of Employability is crucial to learner-workers in an increasingly “little e” (that is, electronic-technological) world.

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