

# International Encyclopedia of Rehabilitation

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*This publication of the Center for International Rehabilitation Research Information and Exchange is supported by funds received from the National Institute on Disability and Rehabilitation Research of the U.S. Department of Education under grant number H133A050008. The opinions contained in this publication are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of CIRRIE or the Department of Education.*

# **Employability**

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The concept of employability generally refers to the ability of an individual to gain and maintain employment. This concept responds to the practical need of taking into consideration the multifaceted, complex phenomenon of occupational integration for a given individual or group of individuals. While considering the individual and social costs of the phenomenon of people living on the margins of the labour market and the impacts of the issue of unemployment, several employability concepts have been developed since the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Gazier, 2001). In addition, the concept of employability was at the centre of the workforce development policy making in several Western countries (Rose, 2007; Rudolph, 2001). Thus, there is no wonder why the concept of employability refers to several more specific definitions created as needs and context dictated. For instance, in a given context, employability refers to the identification of relationships between different socio-economic variables that are typical of potential long-term unemployed workers in a given population, while in another context it refers to the effects of the assignment of income replacement measures based on the time spent away from the workforce.

In the more specific context of rehabilitation, the concept of employability is used to suggest an overall view on the issue of an individual in terms of occupational integration. The description of the issue's features makes it possible to develop interventions that meet the needs of the individual. Therefore, this is a global, descriptive and pragmatic concept that primarily serves a clinical purpose (Dubois, 1991). Employability then refers to a set of prerequisites that an individual needs to possess at a minimal level in order to achieve his/her labour market integration. Considerations of knowledge, skills and attitudes on which it is possible to intervene are taken into consideration in the employability assessment. They fall into four broad dimensions:

- general prerequisites to occupational integration;
- prerequisites for achieving job duties and responsibilities;
- prerequisites associated with job search;
- prerequisites to work adjustment.

In doing so, it is possible to shape a differential representation of an individual's employability profile without getting into a simple dichotomy of the employable/unemployable types.

## **General Prerequisites to Occupational Integration**

(Dimensions involved may not be limited to this list, but this exceeds the scope of this paper. It rather presents a general view that leads the reader to a thorough understanding of the components of employability.)

Implementing occupational integration approaches requires that the individual have stable health conditions and a minimal degree of self-advocacy. Another general prerequisite that is important to consider is the presence of a significant disability that harms the performance of productive activities. Although the establishment of criteria that define the potential of integration into the workforce is based on standards for access to a compensation plan in terms of general prerequisites, three items are generally implicit when it comes to placing the individual in relation with the labour market requirements. The individual must « ensure a minimally acceptable level of performance, minimally and functionally adjust to the new culture of a given workplace and not interfere significantly and repeatedly with the performance of other workers » (Limoges, 2003, p.291).

Having a realistic and achievable occupational integration project is another general prerequisite. With this project, the individual can take active measures to mobilize him/her in a structured manner, taking into consideration various information on himself/herself and on the labour market (Bujold and Gingras, 2000). This project, often referred to as career planning, provides both stable benchmarks describing what the individual is looking for on the labour market, as well as a perspective with demonstrated potential of adjustment to integration into the workforce and personal changes. According to Savickas (2005), career adaptability includes resources used by the individual to cope with occupational integration, different transitions related to the labour market participation and personal upheaval expected to happen during his/her life. In the end, approaching the occupational integration project with a career perspective allows to emphasize on the active role of the individual by avoiding to consider his/her participation in work merely as a one-shot initiative of vocational choice or job search, but rather considering the temporal aspect of work life in an ecological perspective (Bujold and Gingras, 2000).

Before addressing the next dimension, it should be noted that Blustein (2006) argues that the concept of a relatively stable career overtime, with the planning potential it involves, does not necessarily apply to individuals labelled as disadvantaged (i.e. vulnerable to temporary or persistent exclusion in changing situations) in terms of employment. The career refers more to the life of middle-class literate individuals in Western-based societies when the economy fosters steady labour market conditions. Blustein (2006) identifies individuals suffering from a handicap among “disadvantaged” populations. Moreover, the same author stresses the importance of developing a personal sense of autonomy, emancipation through knowledge of social conditions of exclusion and the identification of labour market opportunities to support occupational integration in populations experiencing socio-vocational issues. Despite the differences with the previous view, the latter outlines methods to implement conditions to foster the individual’s active role in the development of an integration initiative taking personal

factors and unsuitable conditions of the environment into consideration, but emphasizing more importantly on acknowledging social barriers and rapid changes that characterize the actual labour market.

### **Prerequisites for Achieving Job Duties and Responsibilities**

This dimension matches the required prerequisites to provide quantitative and qualitative performance in a given area of employment. This addresses the need to take into consideration general education, vocational training and work experience that are necessary to meet the requirements of a job. Other factors also include versatility in the face of the tasks to be accomplished, opportunity to acknowledge and transfer previous credentials, and congruity between personality, tasks, and responsibilities.

This dimension refers to the “development of skills for individuals that will most likely lead them to employment in a reasonable amount of time and suitable conditions” (Rose, 2007, p.171). Education, work experience, and personality outlined above are resources contributing to the development and preservation of the right behaviour to act that the individual mobilizes in order to provide the expected work performance (Michaud, Dionne and Beaulieu, 2006). Skills, whether generic or specific to the achievement of duties and responsibilities in a given occupation, imply taking into consideration the individual’s interactions with his/her environment. These are distinguished from the classical concept of skills referring to personal attributes that are usually assessed in standardized artificial situations (Aubret, 2007).

Skills assessment is based on an inventory approach taking into account all spheres of the lives of individuals (Michaud, Dionne, and Beaulieu, 2006). Firstly, the individual identifies and channels his/her experiential learning by re-evoking previous experiences. Then, it becomes possible to enunciate these learning experiences in terms that match the reality and requirements of the labour market. If necessary, it is also possible to implement on-the-job training and learning modalities to develop the identified skills or new ones in order to improve the employability profile of the individual.

### **Job Search Related Prerequisites**

Job search requires setting up structured and strategic approaches. These approaches requires a sufficient knowledge of oneself, knowledge of the labour market in order to identify opportunities, setting in practice a number of customized technical means (examples: resume, covering letter, presentation-of-self skills in selection interviews), and a general understanding of how the socio-economic environment works (Limoges, 2003). Also, getting involved into job search demands emotional resources in order to manage unexpected circumstances, disappointments, and stress that are inherent to this activity.

Moreover, Saks (2005) divided the behaviours required to seek employment efficiently into five categories:

1. Search through various information sources: this category includes formal (examples: outdoor advertising, newspaper job ads, governmental organizations)

and informal information sources (examples: personal contacts, contacts through another person).

2. Job-search intensity: this category is about the number and the type of approaches made with potential employers.
3. Level of efforts involved: this is about the amount of energy spent and affective commitment involved in job search.
4. Self-assertiveness in job search efforts: this category refers to the individual's capacity to identify criteria that provide guidance throughout his search efforts, as well as the ability to communicate with the parties encountered in interviews.
5. Establishment of networking: although searching for a job is a personal process, it is never accomplished in an isolated manner. Job search implies being able to rely upon the intervention of third parties that support the individual's efforts.

Finally, it is important to remember that successful job search relies upon prerequisites in the two other categories mentioned earlier. In fact, no job-search strategies can fill significant gaps in terms of general prerequisites and prerequisites for achieving job duties and responsibilities.

### **Prerequisites to Work Adjustment**

This dimension refers to qualities, mainly interpersonal, enabling the individual to interact properly with his/her workplace and thus accomplish his/her worker role in a given workplace. These prerequisites can be clustered in two ways. The first one takes into account the ability to identify and meet the labour standards in the workplace. Without drawing up an exhaustive list of these standards, they include punctuality, presenteeism or communication skills with different stakeholders in the workplace (with peers, clients, leaders, etc.).

The second way refers to the dynamic balance established between the worker and the workplace. According to Dawis (2005), this balance is developed in relation with a matching of the worker's needs with the opportunities to meet the work environment's requirements (This model also takes into account a matching between the employer's skills requirements and the skills provided by the worker, point already addressed in the section pertaining to prerequisites for achieving job duties and responsibilities). On one hand, the achievement of this balance requires the individual to be able to identify his/her own needs and what he/she values in his/her duties and responsibilities. On the other hand, the work environment must ultimately provide a variety of opportunities to meet needs, and consistency in the worker's reinforcement of behaviours. It should be noted that this balance is never fully achieved; it evolves according to changes that rule both the worker and the workplace. Skills in managing dissatisfaction, as well as communication and negotiation skills are required in order to establish, maintain and rectify, if needed, the matching between the individual and his/her environment (Eggerth, 2008).

Finally, the establishment of a matching between the individual and his/her workplace is made in a cultural context which is, on one hand, specific to the organization, and on the other hand, to the social context at stake (Sekiguchi, 2004). Job accommodation is a two-way process in which the individual becomes socialized in terms of values and standards in his/her environment. The environment is then influenced by the action of individuals comprising it.

## **General Considerations**

Building on the operationalization of employability from the four dimensions previously provided, it is possible to consider the occupational integration of an individual in rehabilitation from an *interactionist* and global view. Understanding the factors at stake in labour reintegration requires considering personal attributes, labour market features and relationships established between the individual and his/her environment. Although it is complex to take into consideration the set of issues embedded in those relationships, the use of a descriptive view of the various dimensions of employability enables to identify the purposes of an occupational integration intervention. These purposes include:

- Placing the individual vis-à-vis the four different dimensions in order to assess his/her resources and gaps in his/her employability potential;
- Establishing modalities for developing significant aspects in order to enhance the individual's employability potential;
- Supporting the individual in the development of his/her employability potential;
- Assessing the *prognosis for the occupational integration* in a given sector or job according to their requirements and in respect with their impact on the four dimensions of the employability profile;
- Identifying compensation methods, whenever it is possible, for the aspects that cannot be developed.

Given the scope of these dimensions, the development of employability of individuals in rehabilitation requires establishing coordinated integrated interdisciplinary interventions through a structured understanding of the individual's potential and requirements of the labour market, while remaining focussed on the opportunities of the labour world.

In quoting the view of Bujold and Gingras (2000) on the role of the vocational counsellor for our purpose, developing employability not only requires the contribution of experts from various knowledge sectors, but also interventions fostering the individual's independence by enabling him/her to understand his problem fully. Blustein (2006) also stresses the importance of implementing an intervention framework with respect to the self-determination of the individual experiencing exclusion in the labour market. Establishing the individual's employability profile and implementing measures to foster its development is thus a collaborative and concerted approach with individuals in rehabilitation that aims to provide them with access to social participation through holding employment on the labour market.

## Acknowledgements

The author would like to thank Luc Duval, vocational counsellor at the *Institut de réadaptation en déficience physique de Québec (IRDPQ)*, for his contribution in developing the model of the employability phenomenon. This article would certainly not have been possible without his help, whether from the first milestones included into his master's thesis in 1982 or through the exchanges with the author.

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