

Understanding Employers' Perception of Employability Skills and Career Development in Morocco

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history

Received: March 22, 2019

Accepted: April 29, 2019

Published: April 30, 2019

Volume: 7 Issue: 2

Conflicts of interest: None

Funding: None

ABSTRACT

Research into employability issues is currently receiving considerable attention. In Morocco, a significant number of employers are satisfied with the skills of their newly hired employees. However, other employers express their dissatisfaction with the newly hired workers and believe that they lack some of the most basic skills needed for successful employment. The present paper proceeds by providing a systematic review of employability skills from the perspective of employers. It aims to research the gap between employers' requirements of graduates and their actual skills with particular focus on employers' perception. The participants in this study are 20 employers from three sectors, primary education, banking and tourism in the region of Marrakesh-Safi, Morocco. The instrument used for data collection is an on-line questionnaire. More specifically, the study reported that a majority of respondents perceive innovation and creativity as fundamental employability skills. In light of the results, the study recommends that universities should make great efforts to ensure that they are equipping their graduates with employability skills as identified in the industry.

Key words: Employability Skills, Career Development, Graduates, Employers' Perception, Professional World

INTRODUCTION

The changing demands for employability skills require high skilled employees. This is due to the double challenge of a competitive business world and rapid technological advancement that calls for a transformation of the workplace, which necessitates great focus on work that goes beyond task performance (El Mansour & Dean, 2016). As such, in the present challenging and competitive workplace, the role of universities is not merely to churn out graduates with certain areas of qualification, but more importantly to produce graduates with skills that are needed by industries (Ali, Othman, & Ahmad, 2017). Therefore, universities are facing great pressure from prospective employers and other stakeholders to equip graduates with other skills other than academic skills. El Mansour and Dean (2016) underline the fact that if universities fail to deal with this particular issue, then it could produce negative perceptions that would result in employers becoming more selective when hiring competent graduates.

Most of the employers in Morocco are satisfied with competency and skills of the graduates they hire. However, Chbani and Jaouane (2017) reported that each year, about 22% of graduates fail to get employed in any organization, and this could be attributed to the lack of employability skills besides other reasons. Another big concern is that, a significant

portion of these graduates is not employed because they lack skills needed by employers. However, these graduates are said to possess good technical skills but seem to lack critical and soft skills such as communication, leadership, creative thinking, and foreign languages (Ali et al., 2017). Owing to this, these graduates struggle to get employment when they graduate.

Several researchers have investigated the issue in other countries. For example in Sri Lanka, as pointed out by Rajapakse (2016), the problem is most of the time associated with ineffectiveness of the contemporary educational system that somehow fails to equip graduates with suitable training. Therefore, the present study is important for it examines employers' perception of employability skills particularly in the Moroccan context. The findings of the study will be helpful to the Moroccan graduates through informing them about the required employability skills as perceived by employers. In addition, the findings will assist local universities to get a better understanding of the employability skills to equip their graduates based on industry preferences.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The study is situated within the theoretical framework of human capital theory, which considers the economic effects of education and training on individuals. Becker (1993) is

the pioneer in the application of economic theories to social issues. The main forms of the human capital theory are schooling and on the job training. Becker (1993) conducted a study on human Capital that examined similarities of investing in a person's education and training to that of investing in business. Becker (1993) demonstrates the way this theory evaluates the motivation of these investments. Marimuthu, Arokiasamy, and Ismail (2009) underlined that human capital is the process of training, offering knowledge that can improve the competencies, skills and values of the employees, which results in better job performance and competency of the individual and overall performance of the organization.

Marimuthu et al. (2009) further noted that vocational training plays a key role in developing human capital. Companies must hire and retain best employees who offer a competitive advantage. Accordingly, companies spend huge resources to train and develop a competitive human resource. However, this is costly and companies expect to reduce these costs by employing graduates with desired employability skills.

The human capital theory is applicable in understanding employers' perception of employability skills in the current study. The theory seeks to explain why employers seek particular skills. Employers require skills that can bring competitiveness and not just technical skills learned at the university. In addition, human capital theory is able to explain how education and training of individuals are important to any organizational setting. Employees can only become human capital in the sense that they are able to offer competitiveness, when they possess the right skills that are desired by their organization.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Employers' Perception of Employability Skills

Employer perception has become one of the most interesting topics discussed within human resources management circles. Indeed, different studies have been conducted to explore employers' perception of employability skills. Yorke (2006) stated that employability skills comprise of specific personal characters and skills that enhance employment prospects of a graduate. Therefore, employability skills are beneficial not just to the graduate, but also to the organization in which the graduate works.

A great number of students currently pursue higher education to equip themselves with professional qualifications that can allow them to get employed easily. However, getting these professional qualifications alone does not create competitiveness, since they as well need soft skills. Likewise, Confederation of British Industry (2008) in its report noted that companies expect graduates to have desired employability skills to immediately affect the company once they are hired.

Clarke (2018) in his study considers employability skills as a social aspect that should be treated at a group level and not at an individual level. Accordingly, Clarke (2018) holds the view that employability skills is not just the responsibility of the graduate alone, but even the employers and

universities should help graduates in developing the desirable employability skills. For example, Clarke (2018) suggests that organization can mentor newly hired graduates to develop certain values and behaviors that are needed at the organization. This arises from the observation that employability skills may differ from one employer to another. As such, employers have a critical role of helping graduates to develop specific employability skills.

Ali et al. (2017) in their study reported that employers are putting a lot of attention on graduate skills and this calls universities to also focus more on equipping their graduates with skills that are needed in the job market. The latter will help in increasing the graduates' chances of getting employment as they will have the necessary skills to adapt to changing business environment. Ali et al. (2017) further noted that varying academic courses in various universities are applying different ways to equip their graduates with employability skills. This includes offering the graduates work related experience through arrangement of internship or work attachment.

Saunders and Zuzel (2010) also carried out a study on employability skills and found that the most preferred employability skills were personal skills. Other skills desired by employers included core skills. It was interesting to note that technical skills were not given a priority by the employers. Saunders and Zuzel (2010) also found that it was necessary to match the employability skills with academic path through clear connection between employability and curriculum.

Likewise, Archer and Davison (2008) examined employers' perspectives on graduates and found that there was a difference in the skills being offered by some universities and the actual requirements of the employers. The researchers further established that both big and small companies required employability skills such as good communication skills, which were viewed as more important than technical skills like information technology skills. On a similar note, Saunders and Zuzel (2010) reported that a majority of the employers understood the most preferred employability skills they required. This implies that universities have to be in touch with the labor market to understand what the market requires.

Glass, Landsburgh, Quashie, and McGregor (2008) also undertook a study relating to employability. They concluded that few employers hired graduates that had technical skills with the expectation that these newly hired graduates would add value to their organization. Therefore, they treated a degree qualification as a minimum qualification that would allow the graduate to perform their work to the minimum standards.

Asirvatham and Priya (2017) also undertook a study and found that a majority of employers mentioned basic abilities like computer skills and numeracy as being important in employment. Asirvatham and Priya (2017) further noted that international companies were likely to employ graduates with foreign language since they are able to communicate with global customers.

Importance of Employability Skills

In a study by Husain, Mokhtar, Ahmad, and Mustapha (2010), that aimed at examining the importance of employability

skills among engineering graduates, and which comprised of 180 employers from different engineering sectors in Malaysia, established that there was no significant difference based on company size. However, Husain et al. (2010) found that there were significant differences among technology skills and information skills gained by graduates. Further findings indicated that the employers valued employability skills, underlining the importance of employability skills among graduates, particularly those in the engineering field.

A related study, carried out by Yahya (2005) that examined employers' preferences of employability skills within commercial agriculture industry in Malaysia, found that employability skills are valued since they ensured that the employees hired were able to perform to the expected levels. Yahya (2005) found there were five critical attributes that employers sought from the employees, and they included (1) integrity, ethics and honesty, (2) cooperative skills, (3) The use of information communication technology, (4) decision making, and (5) time management. In addition, the study as well found that employers believed that the following five attributes make employees be better workers, being on time, hardworking, being efficient, showing interest in their work and offering quality work.

Gurvinder and Sharan (2008) also carried out a study to examine the employability skills required by employers. The study applied eleven (11) variables derived from past studies on employability skills. Nonetheless, the study only analyzed variables that resulted from factor analysis. The findings of the study indicated that employers preferred to hire graduates from public universities, rather than graduates from private universities. In addition, employer and employees both agreed that employability skills were important.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

The study applied quantitative approach to examine employers' perception of employability skills. As mentioned by Bryman (2017), quantitative research entails the use of numerical and statistical analysis of collected data. As such, quantitative research generates numeric data into usable statistics. It is applied to quantify behaviors, attitudes, opinions and other variables. Bryman (2017) underlined that quantitative research generalizes result from a sample population to formulate facts and identify patterns in a research.

Population

The study involved 20 employers from three sectors, primary education, banking and tourism in the region of Marrakech-Safi. The sample population of 20 was chosen because the researcher had little time to use a bigger sample and it is difficult to get an employer to participate in the study. Likewise, it was my intention to use respondents from different sectors. The employers were randomly selected, though the inclusion criteria required those holding the level of supervisor or higher. This was done on purpose to make sure that the respondents taking part in the study were in a position to

know the employability skills their companies prefer or look for when hiring graduate employees.

Data Collection Instrument

The present study applied a questionnaire about employability skills of graduate students. The questionnaire had 14 items on employers, managers, and professionals' perception towards the employability skills of recent employees. The first part of the questionnaire consisted of six questions that touched upon personal information of the respondents. The second part had seven questions that dealt with employability skills of employees and those desired by the employers. The third part was concerned with questions related to skills besides job specific skills and finally the last section contained ways in which employees could enhance their employability skills.

Data Collection Procedure

The questionnaire was formulated following a pilot study that involved four employers to get useful and pertinent feedback concerning the items included in the questionnaire regarding suitability and clarity. After integrating their feedback in the refined version of the questionnaire, the next step involved actual data gathering. An online questionnaire was uploaded and was sent to 20 employers from the three sectors, primary education, banking and tourism through the internet, the respondents were required to fill the questionnaire online and return it. The 20 fully filled online questionnaires were then collected, analyzed, and discussed in the next section.

FINDINGS

Personal Information of Participants

A majority of the participants who took part in the study were male (60%), and only 40% were female. Regarding level of education, majority hold Master's degree (65%), PhD holders were (25%), and bachelor's degree (10%). Experience level was also considered and the findings indicate that 20% had less than 5 years of experience, 35% had 6-10 years, 35% had 11-20 years of experience and only 10% had 31-40 years of experience. Concerning the productivity sector, majority were from education sector (60%), while 20% were from the banking sector and the other 20% from the tourism sector. Regarding designation, majority were supervisors (55.6%), while directors were 22.2% and department managers were 22.2%.

The Level of Skill Expected from Recent Employees in the Workplace

The participants were asked seven (7) levels of skills they expected from recently employed employees in their workplace. From the findings, the most highly ranked skill based on the obtained mean score (3.05) was Organization/planning. It was then followed with both Teamwork and Learning theory and practice with a mean score of 2.70. The third ranked variable was Work culture which entails employees'

attitudes towards the organization with a mean score of 2.65, and the Conceptual and analytical skills came fourth with a mean score of 2.60. It is surprising that communication and leadership both came last with a mean score of 2.50. Table 1 provides the results obtained.

Skills Employees Joining a New Organization should be Equipped with

When asked which skills employers think new employees should be equipped with when joining a new organization, the respondents had several skills to choose from, and the most preferred skill was adaptable and flexible to cope with changing work environment, followed by effective reading skills. Similarly, listening skills was also ranked highly. Other desired skills were defining and solving problems, creativity, accountability and taking responsibility. Table 2 provides the results obtained.

Ways in which Recent Employees can Enhance their Employability

When asked if recent employees should enhance their employability skills before they seek employed in any organization, an overwhelming majority of 88.9% agreed, whereas only 11.1% disagreed. Suggested ways in which these employees could enhance their employability skills included, knowing the organization, ability to interpret given tasks, ability to find and access new information, ability to handle large amounts of new information, proficiency in languages, technical ability, and computer literacy and through gaining people skills. The following Table 3 illustrates employers' answers.

DISCUSSION

Education is supposed to reflect and address the needs of the society. When developing academic programs, universities and higher education institutions together should undertake surveys to gather information concerning the quality of graduates entering the job market. The findings of the study correspond with findings of previous studies. For instance, Husain et al. (2010) reported employers in their study perceived that engineering graduates did not have the required soft skills to give them an upper hand in employability. A majority of the respondents in the study pointed out that they desired graduates who showed ability to be innovative and creative. However, it was encouraging to hear that most of the employers believed that the majority of the newly employed graduates had the desired skills. This observation is consistent with the study of Chbani and Jaouane (2017) who found out that many companies are satisfied with the skill level of the Moroccan graduates, though some employers still find these graduates to be lacking some of the most desirable employability skills.

The findings indicate that employers' hold a perception that some graduates do not have the skills that are desired in their organization. The employers desire that graduates should have the following skills, communication, leadership, analytical skills, teamwork, work culture and planning. However, employers state that graduates who lack certain

Table 1. The level of skill expected from recent employees in the workplace

	Employability skill	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
1	Communication	2.50	1.395
2	Conceptual and analytical skills	2.60	1.314
3	Work culture	2.65	1.348
4	Teamwork	2.70	1.658
5	Organization/planning	3.05	1.538
6	Learning theory and practice	2.70	1.261
7	Leadership	2.50	1.469

Table 2. Skills employees joining new organization should be equipped with

	Employability skill	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
1	Possess effective and reading skills	1.85	0.587
2	Listening skills	1.00	0.795
3	Define and solve problems	1.25	0.910
4	Adaptable and flexible to cope with changing work environment	1.40	0.940
5	Creative	1.60	0.979
6	Accept responsibility	1.45	1.050
7	Accountability	1.11	0.233

Table 3: Ways in which recent employees can enhance their employability

	Employability skill	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
1	Prior work experience	3.17	1.339
2	Knowing the organization	3.28	1.364
3	Ability to interpret given tasks	3.50	0.985
4	Ability to find and access new information	3.44	1.247
5	Ability to handle large amounts of new information	3.33	1.283
6	Proficiency in languages	3.29	1.359
7	Technicalability	3.39	1.145
8	Computer literacy	3.47	1.179
9	People skills	3.65	0.996

skills can easily learn them through getting new information, interpreting the assigned task, and on the job training. Therefore, it is important that graduates must have the willingness to learn new things and be open to different forms of activities. The graduates should as well strive and reflect on their experience with the objective of improving their performance within and outside the organization.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The present study sought to understand employers' perception of employability skills and career development in Morocco. The study indicates that though a good percentage of Moroccan employers are satisfied with the basic technical

skills possessed by graduates, they feel that some graduates lack important employability skills needed to create a highly competitive human resource team. Employability skills like leadership, analytical mind, communication and creativity are considered necessary before being hired. These skills are essential because possessing the ability to think, to analyze and to make sound decisions is critical for any employee particularly when dealing in a global and competitive business environment that is constantly changing.

The employability skills required by employers may as well mean that our local universities should rethink and adjust their curriculum and teaching practices to include and promote the desired employability skills. However, this could create additional short-term challenges, but could offer long-term solutions. Likewise, the graduates should take a proactive role and actively react to understand what their potential employers require. The graduates should also be able to apply the theory they have learned. This will make them more agile.

In light of the findings, the study recommends that universities should make great efforts to ensure that they are equipping their graduates with employability skills as identified in the industry. More so, universities should consistently engage with industries to understand their changing requirements and needs.

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