
Editorial: HRD and employability

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This special issue of the *International Journal of Human Resources Development and Management* is entitled 'HRD and employability from different perspectives in the Netherlands and Flanders'. It contains seven papers dealing with on the one hand different theoretical viewpoints and on the other hand empirical reports.

During the last decennium, attention to HRD has increased, both in the Netherlands and in Flanders. Authors with Dutch as their mother tongue seem to be especially interested in the concept of employability. For them employability implies a real HRD policy issue rather than a buzzword.

For years, European scientists have tried to find solutions and approaches to define, refine and to develop employability. More generally formulated, employability can be defined as 'the behavioural tendency directed at acquiring, maintaining and using qualifications that are aimed to enhance the ability to cope with a changing labour market during all career stages'. That is to say, in HRD policies employability is related to questions about multi-skilled employees, coping with new job requirements, changes in psychological contract, and so on.

As far as more specific definitions are concerned, we would like to refer to the first contribution, i.e. a paper by Forrier and Sels from the Catholic University in Leuven, Belgium. Their conceptual model offers a framework for future empirical research on employability. They certainly bring some clarification within the debate and their so-called 'Employability Process model' demonstrates what impact other players in the labour market can have upon individuals' labour market opportunities.

In many cases, scientists in the Netherlands and Flanders have considered the concept of employability in close relationship with competence development, because the development of competencies is often seen as a key lever to meet changing jobs. The second contribution by Van der Klink and Boon from the Open University in the Netherlands deals with the current popularity of the concept of competencies, labour market qualifications that are broadly applicable. After an outline of different

perspectives on the concept, they go into some results of a study on the applications of the concept in enterprises and higher education. The aim of their contribution is to gain more insight into the current status of the concept and to investigate competence-based practices. Competence development is seen as an important condition for career flexibility and success in a changing labour market.

Since Atkinson we are familiar with the differences between functional, numerical and economical flexibility. Economical flexibility is a characteristic that is common among external workers and free agents and it refers to the financial independency of a working organisation. Numerical flexibility refers to the possibility of a quantitative adaptation to 'rises' and 'falls' in the demand side of the labour market. Finally, functional flexibility means the capability to meet different, changing job requirements, i.e. functional flexibility is a core characteristic of employability. In the third contribution Van Dam from the University of Tilburg in the Netherlands explores a study wherein she examined experts' motivation for functional flexibility and their willingness to participate in functional flexibility interventions if necessary for the organisation. Her findings indicate that organisations may be able to stimulate experts' functional flexibility by paying attention to individual career aspirations, and by creating a better fit between individuals' objectives and the organisation's flexibility needs.

Career flexibility is not a static attribute. Over life phases and career stages, different opportunities and threats manifest themselves. Moreover, career flexibility is not only a result of individual career development. It is rather one's talent, often combined with a continuous development that determines the amount of career flexibility over different phases and stages. However, in practice, working organisations are led by unrealistic perceptions of both domain-specific expertise, and proficiency in an adjacent or new job domain. The fourth contribution by Thijssen and Van der Heijden from respectively the University of Utrecht and the University of Twente, both in the Netherlands, examines problems with talent development during a career. In many cases so-called 'high potentials' are confronted with developmental problems, sometimes shortly after the start of their career.

Van der Schoot from the University of Twente in the Netherlands discusses an employability study with a domain-related focus. She presents some results from her PhD study wherein she has focused upon the influence of the curriculum on the employability of nursing and healthcare graduates in the Netherlands. Nowadays, graduates need to cope with an increasing diversity and complexity of care situations. In order to enhance the employability, curricula have been broadened. It is important to examine the effects of broad curricula upon the individual employability of healthcare professionals.

Finally, Kwakman from the University of Twente provides a theoretical review of the concept of professional learning and asserts that the very nature of professional work has a profound impact upon the learning process of professionals who perform such work. She states that if we consider professional learning to be a joint responsibility between professionals and the organisations that employ them, organisations would be well advised to enhance professional learning by taking measures to promote opportunities for reflection and interaction within the workplace.

To conclude, the performance of our society as a whole is largely the result of the existence of multiple coherent working systems in which competent employees display their knowledge and skills in different kinds of jobs and in different working settings, and are able to compete with important counterparts. In the business and the service sector, employability tends to be taken for granted and assumed to be the norm, in blissful

ignorance of the obstacles that have to be overcome to attain the level desired. The road one has to take is frequently full of obstacles.

Nowadays, one of the most important challenges in the domain of personnel management is to find out whether influential factors can be detected that stimulate or hinder the development of individual employability throughout a career. We hope that this special issue adds to the theory and practice of career development and enhances a thorough discussion on the proposed models and recommendations that are given throughout the different contributions.