

Employability: what motivates the employee?

Summary of a research project for the Regiecommissie Employability in de Metalektro (Directing Committee Employability in the Metalworking Industry)

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The meaning of employability

In this research project employability is defined as the competency to work, now and in the future of the career. Competency implies attitude, knowledge, and skills: employability means that the person wants to work and is able to do so and that he¹ aspires to remain motivated and able for the rest of his career.

'Everybody' in the government, industry, and trade unions finds employability a wonderful idea. For the government employability is a remedy against unemployment and incapacity for work. For companies the employability of employees is of vital importance: employees who are not motivated and do not develop themselves, are fatal to the companies' results and their position in the market. For employees employability means among other things 'work-security', which is important now that 'job-security' becomes rare.

Questions to be answered by the research

In spite of its generally endorsed importance there are signs that less is done to the promotion of employability than one would expect and that employees are less employable than one would wish. Is this true? If it is, how come? And what can be done about it? These are the most important questions to be answered by this research.

Research design

The investigation started with desk research. About one hundred journal articles, research reports, Internet documents, and books were studied. Most of them were about employability in general, not specifically in the metalworking industry.

The next step was an empirical investigation. The aim was to test and to apply the insights that had resulted from the desk research, in the practice of the metalworking industry. Thirty-eight employees in seven companies, which represent a cross section of the sector in the Netherlands, were interviewed about steps in their career. Which steps do these employees take or consider (in past, present and future) and what makes them take these steps or not take them?

Research outcomes

One of the first things that is noticed in the desk research, is that in many projects and investigations too limited definitions of employability are used. Employability is in general associated with flexibility, mobility and operationality. Using such a definition, one approaches the employee as a passive object, who should willingly agree with the demands of his employer. This approach acknowledges insufficiently, that learning and developing are important for an enduring employability. Intrinsic mo-

¹ Only to avoid phrases like 'his/her' or 'he/she' masculine pronouns are used.

tivation and self-direction are essential for that. If an employee always says 'yes', his development will probably get bogged down by lack of direction, or can even result in incapacity for work as a consequence of burnout or other problems. Without ignoring the importance of flexibility and mobility, employability is essentially about the development of competency and self-direction.

To the question about the current state of employability in the metalworking industry, some positive and negative answers must be given.

Most **employees** are actively involved in their own development. Over half of the interviewed employees are participating in education, courses or training, or considers to do so in the near future. Other respondents consider other steps (internal or external job applications, new tasks in the present job, etc.). Of less than one in five employees, one can say that they 'sit still': they are neither taking nor considering any steps. Most employees also are 'employable' in the sense that they usually react in a positive way to the initiatives of their employer. In general there is not only a willingness, but also a motivation to schooling. Most employees like working and want to continue to work for a long time.

In some other respects the picture of employability is less positive. The initiative for steps in the career more often comes from outside than from inside the person. Often it's the boss who comes with an idea or a request to which the employee says 'yes' without much thought or deliberation. (*"I said 'yes' right away. I presume that they look at the future. If you get an opportunity, it is stupid not to accept it. That would be a bad signal to the boss."*²) Many employees show a wait-and-see attitude. (*"The company will no doubt come with a proposition for a training."*) They rarely look at career opportunities outside the door of their department. Most of them have no plans for the long term future. (*"You can make so many plans, in reality it always goes in a different way. If you still make plans, you risk to be pinned down. One cannot predict the future."*) The really existing willingness and need for development is in general without direction. It's more about getting diplomas than about the development of competency. (*"The more certificates the better. It is wise to go on learning."*) If self-direction is indeed an essential aspect of employability, then that is where the bottleneck is. The career competencies that should direct the developmental process are often lacking.

Concerning the **employers**: they really do promote employability if one takes that as facilitating schooling and training. The offered facilities are generally ample. The employer also regularly takes the initiative to offer training. If employees themselves take initiatives there is generally a large willingness on the employer's side to accept these, especially if it's about training in relation to the occupied job. (*"If you ask something, they don't make problems, especially if it is in the interest of the company."*) A finding from the desk research that employers might obstruct the development of employability of their personnel because of a fear to lose their most competent employees, was not confirmed in the practice of the metalworking industry. Indeed it seems more probable that competent employees leave the company if they find that they have insufficient possibilities to learn and develop.

From all this it should not be concluded that everything is well with employability in the metalworking industry at the employer's side. Also on this side there is a lack of direction. Employers frequently seem to have no plans for their employees, and if they have them, there is little communication about it. (*"I don't know what they have in mind for me."*) Often the aim of training is not sufficiently made explicit and after it took place it's not well evaluated. In a more general way communication leaves much to be desired. Many employees experience especially a shortage of feedback. (*"Feedback was only in the form of the received premium."*) Frequently there are clear agreements on the fact that regularly appraisal interviews should take place between boss and employee, but the way these discus-

² The texts in italics and between quotation marks are translations of statements of respondents during the interviews.

sions are realised is far from optimal. Often they are superficial or formal. (*“If you have problems with something you can say that and they put it on paper.”*) Sometimes the discussions simply don't take place in spite of the regulations. Employers pay little attention to the ways people can learn and develop outside education in their work or by means of other (informal) routes, whereas informal ways of learning are often the most effective. (*“What works very well is to solve a problem at night in a small group with an engineer. That is possible in this company. If you do that at night, you can compensate for your time afterwards. In this way you learn much more than in a training.”*)

Conclusion

The state of employability in the metalworking industry is 'not too bad', but on important points improvement is necessary. Most of the employers and most of the employees put effort in maintaining and enhancing employability. However, often this effort is without direction. Moreover the activities undertaken are too frequently limited to formal schooling and training. The promotion of career competencies of employees (self-reflection, work-exploration, career control and - to a lesser degree - self-presentation) offers the most promising handle for improvement. Improving the culture of communication and learning seems an important means. The next paragraph offers some suggestions.

Recommendations

For employers' organizations and trade unions

- Participation not only in formal training, but also in self-directed, informal learning processes should be stimulated. Activities that create a foundation for learning (for example: analysis of competencies, external career advice, internal procedures to come to Personal Development Plans, possibilities of exploring other work situations) should be promoted.
- A career project that provides for assistance in career development (both individually, in groups and by means of self-help workbooks) might be started.
- The possibilities of the Internet should be used for exchanging information on initiatives in the field of employability and for communicating about them.
- The government should be stimulated to implement Article 9 of the European Social Charter, so that people who need this, can get career coaching.

For the management of companies

- In consultation with the Human Resources Department and Works Council or employees' representatives an explicit employability policy should be formulated, in which:
 - the management state that they see the competencies of the employees as an important asset of the company and that they feel the necessity to invest in the maintenance and further development of this asset
 - attention is paid not only to the development of competencies itself, but also to activities that lay a foundation for directing this development of competencies:
 - on the side of the company, it concerns here mainly the connection of the development of competencies of employees to the mission and strategy of the company
 - on the side of the employees, it concerns the development of career competencies that allow the employee to direct his own development
 - a specific choice is made from the available employability instruments
 - attention is paid not only to formal education, but also to informal learning processes, for example self-directed learning processes, be it individual or in teams
 - attention is paid not only to learning for the present job, but also to the personal development of the employee

- it is made clear, for example in the appraisal system, that the (middle) management carries responsibility for the development of the employees
- Make sure that the formulated policy is executed: make someone responsible who is committed and who has a sufficiently strong position in the company.
- Pay attention to communication:
 - promote contacts between departments of the company and promote that people consider the company as a whole
 - make sure that managers and bosses are able to give feedback and to coach employees
 - communicate about the current state of affairs and the future of the company in a clear and attractive way. Promote discussion about this
 - provide for information on available jobs and career paths, job openings, and opportunities for training. Do not restrict this to information on paper, but stimulate that information is exchanged on a personal level
 - communicate also well with third parties. For example discuss with a training institute the aims of a training. Do not accept the existing offer thoughtlessly, but consider the possibilities of a tailor-made course. Evaluate with the institute the conduct of affairs and the effects.

For the boss

- You should pay attention to giving feedback, both positive and negative feedback. Good feedback comes soon, is clear, balanced, directed to the behaviour of the other and reacts attentively to the responses. Learn how to do this, if necessary.
- You should develop a coaching leadership style. Such a style stimulates the employee to find and carry out solutions to problems. This style promotes individual and group learning processes.
- Implement the instruments that are chosen in the employability policy, as intended, and not as a formality. For example:
 - Try to carry out an appraisal interview as an open exchange and effective reflection, that results in concrete appointments.
 - Ask the employee stimulating questions. If you notice discrepancies in the images that the employee holds of himself, the job, the future etc., confront him with this in a careful manner. Promote his self-reflection, but do not force this.
 - Connect your propositions or requests to career steps with the goals of the organisation and of the employee. Evaluate afterwards to what extent the goals are reached.
- Communicate concerning these processes with the management and make use of the services of the Human Resources Department.

For the employee

- You ought to regularly take some time to think about your experiences and your fantasies and ideas for the future. To what extent are you still satisfied with your work? Which things annoy you? Is this what you used to want? What could be done in a better way? How long do you want to continue doing what you do? What would your ideal job look like? Etc.
- Talk about this with others. Choose a few people who will listen to you and won't come too quickly with their own opinion. Listen also to their stories concerning their experiences in work and try to picture how you would find this. Ask feedback from people you trust, for example: How do you find the way I tackled this? What do you think of my position? What would you have done in my place? If possible, discuss these kind of things with your boss, but also with colleagues, family, and friends. Try to find at least one person you can trust, a counsellor or coach with whom you can discuss your work, career, and life.

- Give also feedback to colleagues: tell them what strikes you, how you appreciate the work of the other, what could be alternatives for the chosen approach. However, be careful: not everyone is open for this. Don't impose your feedback.
- You should make a career plan and revise it regularly. For most people this is difficult. For this reason use aid and resources, for example a workbook. Ask for help, for example from colleagues, your boss, the people at the Human Resources Department, family or friends or a professional consultant. Do not use your plan to pin yourself down, but as a means to help you realize what is important for you.