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Does (in)formal learning enhance employability?

Beatrice I.J.M. van der Heijden

Open University of the Netherlands, Maastricht School of Management, Twente University

Jo Boon, Marcel R. van der Klink and Ely Meys

Open University of the Netherlands

Not much is known about the actual contribution of informal learning to employability over and above formal learning activities. This paper presents findings of a research project among university staff members and is aimed to determine the contribution of formal and informal learning activities in the light of future career potential. Findings indicate that employability is enhanced by a mix of formal and informal learning opportunities. Possibilities for networking appear to be significant for employability.

Keywords: employability, informal learning, training

The concept of lifetime employability implies that individual employees become more accountable for investments in their own human capital and hence in their own job security, learning and career development. Maintaining employability presupposes the availability of learning possibilities and its actual use by employees throughout their career. Next to formal learning activities one should adopt opportunities for informal learning in order to increase one's potential at the labour market.

In order to better understand the added value of informal learning this paper approaches both formal and informal learning activities in relation to one another and regards its contribution to workers' employability. Given the lack of empirical research on the concept of employability, its predictors, and its outcomes, a systematic approach addressing the relationship between (in)formal learning and employability might partly close the literature gap and will shed more light on the significance of this domain of HR activities (Van der Heijde & Van der Heijden, 2006).

Employability and informal learning

This paper adopts the definition of employability as was proposed by Van der Heijde and Van der Heijden (2006). They defined employability, or career potential, as 'the continuous fulfilling, acquiring or creating of work through the optimal use of competencies' (p. 453). Their definition is consistent with the definition of Forrier and Sels (2003, p. 106), and is in line with the conceptualization by Fugate, Kinicki and Ashforth (2004). What these conceptualizations share is that employability implies a permanent process of acquisition and fulfillment of employment within or outside the current organization, to date and in the future.

Van der Heijde and Van der Heijden (2006) developed an employability instrument which combines domain-specific expertise (Van der Heijden, 2000) with more generic competences. Previous research using this instrument in various settings among professionals working in different occupations, showed high levels of reliability and validity (see for example Van der Heijden, 2005). The instrument consists of the following four generic competences, as important dimensions of employability, alongside occupational expertise: 1) *anticipation and optimization*, i.e. preparing for and adapting to future changes in a personal and creative manner, and striving for the best possible results; 2) *personal flexibility*, i.e. the capacity to easily adapt to all kinds of changes in the internal and external labour market that do not pertain to one's immediate job domain; 3) *corporate sense*, i.e. the participation and performance in different work groups, including organizations, teams, occupational communities and other networks, which involves sharing responsibilities, knowledge, experiences, feelings, credits, failures, goals, etc.; and 4) *balance*, i.e. compromising between opposing employers' interests as well as one's own opposing work, career, and private interests (employee), and between employers' and employees' interests.

. Available findings indicate that employees spend considerable time to learning in their work (see for example the studies of Livingstone and Eichler (2005) and Borghans et al. (2006).

department, and job position. *Learning climate* as perceived by the individual employee was operationalized by means of two dimensions: one scale measured the lack of time for learning, and a second scale measured perceived team support. All items were scored by means of a five-point rating scale ranging from (1) never true, to (5) always true. *Formal job-related training* was measured by asking respondents to fill in the number of days they attended training in the past year in the area of their current job, and in adjacent areas. *Other formal training* was measured by asking respondents to rate the number of days they attended training in the past year in other areas, or training for personal development, thus not related to their domain-specific expertise or current job. In total four learning conditions were included: learning value of the job, interaction with supervisor, networking within own organization, and networking outside organization. *Learning value of the job* refers to the employees' perceptions of the degree in which their jobs provide opportunities for everyday learning. This scale consists of six items using a six-point rating scale ranging from (1) strongly disagree to (6) strongly agree. *Interaction with one's supervisor* refers to the quality of the exchange between supervisor and employee. Graen and Uhl-Bien's (1995) Leader-Member Exchange scale was used, and all seven items were scored on a five-point rating scale. A scale developed by Bozionelos (2003) was used to measure the amount of *networking within the organisation*. Six items were used to measure the amount of networking using a five-point rating scale ranging from (1) not at all to (5) to a very large extent. The six-item scale that assessed the amount of employee's *networking outside the organisation* (Bozionelos, 2003) refers to the extensiveness of an employee's ties with individuals outside one's own organisation (see also Adler and Kwon, 2002; Higgins and Kram, 2001). Respondents rated on a five-point scale ranging from (1) not at all to (5) to a very large extent. For the measurement of employability 47 items were used: 15 items for occupational expertise, 8 items for anticipation and optimisation, 8 items for personal flexibility, 7 items for corporate sense, and 9 items for balance, respectively. All items were scored using six-point rating scales. Higher scores indicate higher levels of employability.

Results

In total 215 employees (107 men and 108 women) belonging to the non-academic staff participated to the electronic questionnaire. The respondents' average age was 46 years. 77% of the respondents were older than 40, and 33% were over-fifty years old. The majority of the respondents had full-time job contracts (59%). 72 respondents worked at central departments (bureau of the university), 39 held job positions at faculties, 80 were working at the service centre/ICT department, and 26 were working at educational research and consultancy departments. The largest groups of respondents worked in secretarial/clerical jobs (48 respondents), ICT (35 respondents), student support jobs (32 respondents), or management support jobs (29 respondents). Means, standard deviations and correlations were computed and are displayed in Table 1 (see Appendix A).

The means of the two learning climate variables indicate that, on average, employees experienced the climate as slightly positive: severe time constraints are lacking, while team support is perceived as somewhat encouraging. The means of both variables that measured formal learning, job-related training and other formal training respectively, indicate that the number of days spent on training is quite modest. The mean score of 3.87 for learning value of the job indicates that, on average, respondents experienced that their jobs provide some learning possibilities. Respondents experienced quite some quality interactions with their supervisors, as the mean of 3.48 shows. In general, respondents' networks within the organisation were substantially larger than their networks outside.

The first research question concerns the impact of employee characteristics and organizational context on formal and informal learning. To explore these relationships regression analyses were computed. Sex, age, educational qualification, tenure, and job contract (full-time versus part-time) were entered in step one (employee characteristics), followed by the variables that measured aspects of the organizational learning climate in step two. The results of the regression analyses are displayed in Table 2. This table only presents the statistical significant findings.

The results displayed in Table 2 show that no significant outcomes were found for the analyses with job-related formal training, and for other formal training. Yet, for all four *informal* learning conditions significant results have been found. Our outcomes suggest that two employee characteristics, i.e. educational qualification and a full-time job contract are the most important predictors. The two learning climate variables only as appeared to be predictors for interaction with one's supervisor.

Table 3. Regression Analyses with Employability Dimensions as Dependents

Dependent variable	Regression model (enter)	Standardized B	p
Occupational expertise	Formal training (job-related)	.17	.02
	Learning value of the job	-.17	.03
	Interaction with supervisor	.14	.05
	Networking within organization	.17	.04
Anticipation and optimisation	Formal training (job-related)	.27	.00
	Learning value of the job	.14	.05
	Networking outside organization	.26	.00
Corporate sense	Formal training (job-related)	.14	.04
	Interaction with supervisor	.21	.00
	Networking within organisation	.36	.00
Balance	Interaction with supervisor	.34	.00
	Networking within organization	.19	.02

Table 4. Hierarchical Regression Analyses using Employee Characteristics, Organisational Context, Formal and Informal Learning as Predictors and Employability Dimensions as Dependents

Predictor	Dependent variables				
	Occupational expertise	Anticipation and Optimisation	Corporate sense	Personal flexibility	Balance
<i>Step 1</i>					
Age	.06	-0.3	.19**	.03	-.03
Gender	-.04	-0.9	-.11	-.22**	-.13*
Marital status	.03	.07	.13*	.15*	.10
Ed. level academic	.03	.03	.07	.06	-.09
Ed. level higher prof.	.10	.12	.05	.11	-.07
Ed. level medium prof.	-.02	.03	-.02	.03	-.16
Full-time	.17*	.09	.27**	.24**	.12*
<i>Step 2</i>					
Org. tenure	.02	-.12	-.17*	-.19*	-.08
Learning climate-time	-.27**	-.03	-.02	-.15*	-.31**
Learning climate-team	-.18**	-.06	-.01	-.14	.06
<i>Step 3</i>					
Formal training (job-related)	.17*	.27**	.13*	.14	.07
Other formal training	-.05	.01	-.06	-.01	-.05
Interaction with supervisor	.12	.08	.22**	.08	.21**
Networking within org.	.20*	-.08	.41**	.16*	.18*
Networking outside org.	.06	.23**	.01	.06	-.01
Learning value job	-.17*	.14	-.03	-.10	.02
<i>Model summary</i>					
Step1 Δ R square	.04	.05	.11	.08	.06
Step2 Δ R square	.08	.02	.04	.05	.19
Step3 Δ R square	.09	.16	.24	.06	.08
Full model R square	.21	.23	.39	.20	.34
Overall F	3.2**	3.8**	7.9**	2.9**	6.2**

a. Standardized regression coefficients (Beta) shown for the last step in the regression
 b. *p<.05 **p<.01

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