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Preparing young people for a changing labour market

Alan Brown

Individuals are increasingly changing jobs more often during their working lives. Concerns about the most effective way that initial education and training can prepare people for work sometimes leads to a narrow focus upon immediate ‘employability’ – the skills necessary to get a (first) job. The major problem with this approach is that whether someone is able to get a job or not depends on the state of the labour market as well as their skills profile. So we need to move beyond only talking about ‘employability,’ and consider in tandem how individuals can be better equipped to be more resilient, cope with uncertainty in fast changing labour markets and make successful labour market transitions through promoting the concept of ‘career adaptability.’

1. Focus upon promoting (career) adaptability

Career adaptability refers to the capability of an individual to make a series of successful transitions where the labour market, organisation of work, occupations and organisational ways of working may all be changing. This approach involves seeking to develop personal characteristics, like being proactive and flexible, as well self-regulatory competencies that shape career adaptive behaviours, including individuals seeking new challenges or wishing to engage in continuing personal development. Learners, teachers, trainers and employers need to recognise that it is crucial that young people and adults at all stages of their career progression are ready to continue their development in increasingly demanding employment, education or training contexts.

The focus on adaptability can be complementary to other education and training

goals, it is just that attention is given to the need for individuals to be aware of possible subsequent labour market transitions, not just concentrating on achieving the first transition into work. So let us look at the experiences of those who have demonstrated their career adaptability by making a series of successful labour market transitions.

2. The role of learning in successful labour market transitions

There are four key dimensions relating to the role of learning in developing career adaptability: learning through challenging work; updating a substantive knowledge base (or mastering a new knowledge base); learning through (and beyond) interactions at work; and being self-directed and self-reflexive.

Challenging work can help individuals adapt across their career through the iterative interaction between work and personal development. Indeed mastering challenging work in one field can help build a platform from which to adapt to work in other fields. Interestingly, where employers tried to institutionalise support for higher skills development, as well as supporting the development of technical or practical expertise they also sought to encourage staff with the ability to support the learning of others and have the ability to think through and, if necessary, bring about changes in the ways that tasks are tackled.

Having successfully mastered a disciplinary, vocational or specialist knowledge base (associated with completion of an apprenticeship, vocational training, graduate or postgraduate training) could provide a platform for subsequent learning for labour market transitions. Initial studies in higher education and/or in vocational training were often seen as relevant in some way to their current jobs, even when they were working in a different occupational area from that for which they had originally studied or trained. This was because they had learned particular ways of thinking and practising that stood them in good stead for the rest of their career.

The actual knowledge base itself, however, often required considerable updating and this could be achieved partly through reflection on experiences at work and partly through career development activities away from work.

Opportunities for 'learning by interacting' are often seen as a key component of learning-rich jobs, where you can learn from interacting with patients, colleagues, customers, clients etc. Participation in and learning through interacting within communities and networks is a fundamental way for re-constructing a sense of the whole work process as well as a vehicle to develop expertise, including how to communicate effectively in different contexts.

At work, being self-directed through taking advantage of learning opportunities is helpful for individual development. Being self-reflexive and able to identify your current skill set and how this might be enhanced and extended is useful. Those who make successful transitions are often self-directed in either or both their learning and development and their career more generally: if you can learn to adapt and continue to develop in your current job, even in less than ideal circumstances, then this provides a basis for making successful transitions in future.

3. Supporting the development of adaptability in initial education, training and employment

In this view the key challenge is to ensure that initial education and training requires young people to complete challenging tasks (involving practical, cognitive and communicative demands); master a substantive (vocational, technical or disciplinary) knowledge base; engage in collaborative tasks so that they learn through interactions, and become increasingly self-directed and self-reflexive.

There is a psychological dimension of how being self-directed (and successful in making transitions) reinforces your confidence that you will be able to do this again in the future. Those individuals who see that their skills can be transferred

to other contexts have significant advantages in changing career direction over those who define themselves almost exclusively by their occupational and organisational attachments. This advantage stems from the former having a dynamic sense of themselves, as being able to navigate their own route through the labour market, whereas the latter are dependent upon the pathways linked to a particular organisation or occupation.

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