Meanings of Employability in a New Age

By Jeanette Daines, IVETA President

Introduction: A New Age

Looking at the surface, it is difficult to comprehend the richness of the depths. Go outdoors on a moonlight night and gaze at the stars; there is much to behold, and we may be fascinated or in awe of the spectacle we see—even when the exciting discoveries of recent years are not visible to the naked eye or understandable by us. Likewise, we might turn to the ocean, and watch the surf breaking near the shore or listen to the rhythmic sounds so hypnotic—all the while failing to grasp the reality of the complex marine life in its depths. Or we might open a newspaper and see within its folds the reported happenings of the day—the “who, what, where, when and how” of daily life—but even then struggling to comprehend the meaning of it all.

We say we are moving into a new age, an age where information and knowledge are prized and where incredible possibilities lie before us—if we can only understand and recognize what they are. We live in a time of discovery, of turmoil, of advances and setbacks. It is exciting, tragic, wonderful, and awful. It is the time of our lives. In some countries, populations are surging; in others they are growing old. In some places people are fighting the forces of time and the environment; in others they are fighting their neighbors. Everywhere, people look for peace and prosperity.

In coming to Mauritius for this conference we have the special advantage of being able to engage in dialog with persons from many different countries and cultures. We hold varied perspectives on many things, but we also can make the assumption that we are here because of our keen interest in technical vocational education and training, and because of the conference theme on challenges and employability.

Understanding “Employability”

Before we begin to explore the challenges associated with employability, let me respectfully suggest that we must consider a basic question as the foundation for our discussions. That question is, “What meanings are associated with employability?” Another critical question is, “Why is employability important?”

We live in an emerging era—an age where there are discoveries in the surrounding solar system, the oceans, and the countryside. There are people who need work to live, and to have a reason for living. We need to think about the work we do, and why we must have mutual understanding to make progress in meeting these challenges.
On first thought, we might say that the response to the question is obvious. Everybody knows what “employability” is. The answer is straightforward. Employability is the condition of being able to obtain work. It is as the dictionary states; if “employ” is defined as being put to use or service, then “employability” comprises the attributes a person has to have to make him or her useful as a worker.

Meanings as Definitions, Attributes, and Significance

Meanings of employability have at least three dimensions, including dimensions of definition, of attributes, and of significance or effects.

Definitions. The first dimension is the meaning of employability as it is defined. This is the least complex of the three types of meanings, for a definition is usually a written and agreed-upon concept. Definitions do change over time, but the process is usually very gradual. The term being defined, if it is useful in contemporary communication, tends to be extended to relate to comparable situations. A word might become obsolete, especially if its referent does. If it becomes obsolete, it is likely to disappear or be adapted. I trust this will not happen to the concept of “employability,” for this is a word which holds great importance for people in most, if not all, cultures.

Attributes. We may agree on the basic definition of “employability,” but then begin to think differently about the attributes of the concept, or, --in other words—the characteristics that make one employable. Attributes are the second dimension of meaning. These characteristics are substantially influenced by time and place, by culture and tradition. It also makes a difference whether you think about attributes from the perspective of a prospective employee, a training provider, or an employer. Plus, views about attributes emerge with new advances in technology. For example, today is July 22, 2002. “Employability” in our time means that a prospective employee can bring to his or her position a certain base of knowledge, skills, and attitudes—just like he or she might have done ten, twenty, thirty, or forty years ago. For some jobs, these may be as appropriate now as they were in the past. An individual who made a living through unskilled labor then would find the necessary qualifications now would be much the same; only the employment opportunities would have been reduced, for today is also a day where technology—especially technology of a sophisticated nature—is the driving element or resource for many jobs. Prospective workers—or even those who are employed—are faced with a new reality of present and future. In today’s world, employability requires that a person is competent in the use of technology. Information and computer technologies have become essential components of the knowledge economy. To fully participate on either a local or worldwide scale, one must have computer skills.

Almost forty years ago, an extensive study of vocational education in the United States was commissioned at the request of the President. The title of the resulting report was “Education for a Changing World of Work,” and the content included this farsighted analysis:

“It is increasingly clear that there is no real assurance now that mastery of an
occupation, once achieved, will last any worker a lifetime. Although jobs may change, a worker who has mastered the skills of a trade or occupation and who has kept himself abreast of new techniques and developments can reasonably expect to continue in his trade throughout his working life. Pre-employment training of youth must therefore provide a solid occupational foundation. In addition, the potential member of the labor force must be well aware of his responsibilities for his own self-development if he is to continue to keep up-to-date in his occupation. Since more and more workers will need a program of life-long learning, continuing educational opportunities must be provided to cope with occupational change. Vocational educators must train more broadly for career patterns, for a lifelong sequence of employment opportunities.” (U.S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare. (1964). *Education for a Changing World of Work: Report of the Panel of Consultants on Vocational Education.* Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, p. 16).

These words, written almost forty years ago, said that occupations change, and even though it is essential for workers to master the basic competencies in an organization, they must also change in accordance with needs of the work place. To do this, workers must be lifelong learners, responsible for their own self-development.

Employability then means that the individual (and the training provider) must be carefully attuned to changes in needed attributes. Employers, employees, and educators/trainers should be in close communication to identify emerging attributes that make a person employable, and the practices that foster them. Do these attributes include knowledge of special operations? a second (or perhaps a third) language? a comfort level in working with persons of a different culture? problem solving skills? ability to use the Internet? willingness to travel? willingness to accept a certain level of remuneration? availability to work during a particular time of day, or in a particular place? These aspects could all be attributes of employability.

**Significance.** In the third dimension of meaning, that is, meaning in the sense of significance or influence, we encounter the full range of human and societal costs and benefits related to employability. Here the meanings are not definitional, but they may be influenced by the attributes.

For an individual, some examples of meaning in the sense of significance are as follows:

1. Employability means that one is able to contribute one’s work as a fully participating member of society.
2. Employability means being able to provide for one’s personal needs and for those of one’s family.
3. Employability means that one is empowered to make choices, to be in charge of one’s life.
4. Employability means that a person has confidence in his or her own present and future success, and
5. Employability means that a person—through lifelong learning—can be continually growing and developing.

For society, having a workforce that is highly employable:
1. Provides the necessary human resources for economic and social development.
2. Ensures that workers are capable of innovation and diversification.
3. Reflects the degree of social, economic, and political stability that enabled citizens to develop characteristics of employability.
4. Reduces the financial and social costs which are incurred when people are unable to obtain adequate employment.
5. Enables the society to plan for the future, negotiate new partnerships, and engage in global commerce.

These are but a few of the impacts of employability. If the employability of a society’s workforce is low, it is likely there will be a skills gap, a knowledge gap, a health gap, a social gap, a political gap—all destabilizing factors for a country or region. It is not a pretty picture.

IVETA’S CONTRIBUTION

Through forums such as this conference, we are able to examine the intricacies of the challenges involved in meeting employability needs. The cooperation and support of the Mauritius Industrial and Vocational Training Board have made it possible to hold this conference, and I want to express our gratitude for their invitation and leadership. Increasingly, Mauritius is known throughout the world as a diverse society where pluralism works.

IVETA, the International Vocational Education and Training Association, is a nonprofit, nongovernmental organization and network of vocational educators at all levels and from all around the globe. It is dedicated to the advancement and improvement of high-quality vocational technical education and training—wherever it exists, and wherever it is needed. Through forums, networking, research and development, and dissemination of information, IVETA is working to create a new era in communication among vocational educators around the globe. So it Mauritius. The energy, enthusiasm, and commitment to teamwork of our Mauritian hosts have resulted in this excellent conference. Let us join them with our own energy, enthusiasm, and commitment!

Thank you for your attention, and please enjoy the conference.