The HEART Trust/NTA

Improving the Employability of Technical High Schools’ Graduates
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Executive Summary

The paper provides a definition of Employability Skills and a description of these skills. It briefly outlines employers’ perception of the competence level demonstrated by recruits (as demonstrated in the literature and in studies that have been conducted). Employers have expressed a level of satisfaction with the technical competencies demonstrated by recruits but have stated that their employability skills/non-technical skills leave much to be desired.

The writer stresses the importance of the education and training system rising to the challenge of adequately preparing today and tomorrow’s workforce in the current era of information and global competition. The HEART Trust/NTA involvement in developing Jamaica’s technical high school is briefly outlined. Professional Development activities conducted by the HEART Trust/NTA’s funded Technical High Schools Development Project (THSDP) to enable teachers to better prepare students to be employable are outlined.

The paper ends with a recommendation for a public education programme to be mounted to enable the general public to understand the importance of employability skills and endeavour to demonstrate them.
**Definition of Employability Skills**

Employability skills are the generic *skills, attitude* and *behaviour* that employers look for in new recruits and that are delivered through training programmes for current employees. There are many labels for employability skills. Some, or a combination of them are referred to as, basic skills, core skills, critical workplace competencies, soft skills, and non-technical skills. These are really the same skills. Employability skills are not job specific skills, not technical competence but skills which cut vertically across all jobs from entry level to that of Executive Director. They also cut horizontally across all industries. Simply stated, employability skills are not only fundamental academic skills but also a variety of attitudes and habits, that make employees an asset to the employer.

**Description of Employability Skills**

Research has shown that the following are the fundamental skills” and “workplace competencies” that high-performance workplaces require:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Skills</th>
<th>Descriptions</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>1. Basic Skills</strong></td>
<td>Employers need persons who can:</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Understand and speak the language in which business is conducted</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Listen, understand and learn</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Read, comprehend and use written materials, including graphs, etc</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Write effectively in the languages in which business is conducted</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Understand and solve problems involving mathematics and use the results</td>
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<td><strong>2. Thinking Skills</strong></td>
<td>• Think creatively, make decisions, solve problems, visualize</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Know how to learn and reason</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Think critically and act logically to evaluate situations.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>3. Personal Qualities</strong></td>
<td>Employers need persons who can demonstrate:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Self esteem and confidence</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
• Honesty, integrity and personal ethics
• A positive attitude toward learning, growth and personal health
• Initiative, energy and persistence to get the job done
• The interest to continue to learn and become engaged in lifelong learning
• The ability to set goals and priorities in work and personal life.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Workplace Competencies</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>1. Interpersonal</strong></td>
<td>Employers need persons who:</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Understand and contribute to the organization’s goals</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Understand and work within the culture of the group</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Plan and make decisions with others and support the outcome</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Respect the thoughts and opinions of others</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Exercise “give and take” to achieve group results</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Seek a team approach as appropriate</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Lead when appropriate, mobilizing the group for high performance</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Work to satisfy customers’ expectation.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>2. Information</strong></td>
<td>• Acquire and use information</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>3. Technology</strong></td>
<td>• Work with a variety of technologies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Use technology, instruments, tools and information systems effectively.</td>
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<td><strong>4. Management of Resource</strong></td>
<td>Employers need persons who can demonstrate:</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• The ability to plan and manage time, money and other resources to achieve goals</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Accountability for actions taken</td>
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</table>

**Importance of Employability Skills**

We are in a new era – the age of information and of global competition. Old ways of doing things are painfully disappearing. The types of jobs we do have changed as have the industries in which we work and the skills they require. Workplace today requires new and broader skills...
than ever before. With the advent of globalization and economies which have become increasingly digital and knowledge–based, competitiveness rests on the competence of people. The education and training system must rise to the challenge of adequately preparing today’s and tomorrow’s workforce. Curriculum and training instruction must improve to enable students to develop skills, not only to make them employable but also to demonstrate high standards of performance in today’s high performance workplace.

As the Federal Reserve Chairman, Alan Greenspan states, “The global economy is one which is moving Capital from failing technologies to those at the cutting edge thus quickening the pace at which jobs become obsolete. It is imperative, therefore, that our education and training institutions better prepare students for the rising demands of the workplace and help workers who must keep up with those changing demands and who must cope with the consequences of global competition renew and upgrade their skills”

Current status of Employability Skills

A review of the literature shows that employers have expressed a level of satisfaction with the technical competencies demonstrated by today’s graduates but that they have serious concerns with their employability skills/non-technical skills. An Employer Survey conducted in 1995 to determine employers’ perception of technical high school graduates outlines that the Jamaican employers, have stated that these recruits enter the workplace with acceptable levels of technical competencies but they identify Personal Qualities and Interpersonal Skills as the areas most in need of improvement.

The HEART Trust/NTA Involvement in the Technical High Schools

There are fourteen (14) Technical High Schools in Jamaica. These schools in addition to preparing students for a general academic programme place strong emphasis on helping each student to acquire technical competence in at least one technical/vocational area.
Over the past six years the National Training Agency has funded a project to assist in the development of these schools. One of the objectives of the project is to improve the employability skills of graduates.

**Strategies utilized by the Technical High Schools Development Project (THDSP) to Improve Graduates Employability**

School Development Planning (SDP) is the main approach used to bring about improvement in the schools. Each school received training in preparation and implementation of a Three Year Development Plan. A detailed Action Plan is prepared annually by each department in the school. An emphasis of the Action Plan is Professional Development workshops for teachers to help them to acquire and demonstrate the skills to better prepare students for the workplace. Much follow-up is done by project staff and assistance is provided to ensure that strategies agreed on at training sessions are implemented.

The following are some strategies emphasized in training sessions. Teachers are encouraged to utilize them to improve the employability of graduates:

Teachers have:

1. *been encouraged to make students aware of the importance of employability skills and to include components of employability skills in teaching all subjects.*

   Teachers are required to inform students and reinforce that employers place more value on basic, higher-order and attitudinal – employability skills than job-specific technical skills. They are expected to create a *workplace–like environment* where they communicate *employer-like expectations* for punctuality, decision-making capability, cooperation, etc as these attitudinal skills will help to familiarize students with workplace norms. Teachers are expected to be *good role models and demonstrate these skills and traits.*

2. *accepted the fact that employability skills such as developing a positive attitude*
and a cooperative manner are qualities that are teachable (both directly and indirectly).

There continues to be many teachers who believe their students will ‘pick up’ some required skills and abilities incidentally in the course of growing up and being in the education system. The research conducted with employers makes it clear that this is not the case. Teachers in the technical high schools are expected to place attitudinal skills development on the same level as academic and technical skills. Pedagogical strategies such as role playing/simulation, and group discussion are used to teach some attitudinal skills.

3. **been encouraged to hold and communicate high expectations for learning and behaviour of their students.**

In some secondary school settings vocational classes are for students who are considered to be low-ability students. Oftentimes, negative messages are conveyed to these student about their capacity to learn and conduct themselves appropriately. Teachers in the technical high schools are encouraged to set high standards for their students’ acquisition of technical skills and employability skills.

4. **been trained to be facilitators and coaches rather than lecturers and order givers requiring students to take much of the responsibility for their own learning.**

Teachers are expected to relate to their students in the ways that supervisors in high-performance workplaces relate to those they supervise. Each is expected to function as a guide and “expert practitioner”. This provides opportunities for students to engage in decision-making with others while working with team members and groups solving problems, testing of ideas, etc. The school-based professional development workshops facilitated by the project encourage teachers to become facilitators of learning. The methodologies are varied taking into consideration students’ varying abilities. Teachers are required to engage students as active participants in the learning process as prospective employers expect them to be active participants at the workplace”.

Loveda Jones: The HEART Trust/NTA: Improving the Employability of Graduates
5. **Teacher/Instructor Evaluation**

Performance indicators for teachers are established. These indicators place emphasis on the quality of teaching delivery and the attitudinal skills that teachers are expected to demonstrate. An annual performance evaluation is conducted to determine strengths and areas in need of improvement. Some areas in need of improvement are addressed in professional development workshops, seminars, and school-based staff development sessions. Extensive efforts have been focused on improving students’ literacy skills through the diagnosis of Reading problems and workshops to assist teachers in addressing their problems. In a similar way Mathematics and English workshops have been conducted to assist teachers to better enable students to improve communication and numeracy skills. Teachers are also encouraged to pursue courses to upgrade their qualification.

6. **Career Development**

Employability skills must be part of the career development process so that students can actively use them in various situations. Over the years career development has not been a strong focus of the Guidance and Counselling programme offered in the technical high schools. Under the THSDP, Guidance Counsellors and Work Experience Teachers have participated in training sessions on the importance of Career Education and how it can be infused in all the subjects being taught so that students are able to see how what they study is relevant to the world of work and to their occupational interests.

**Concluding Comment:**

**Public Education Programme**

The lack of employability skills such as punctuality, ability to work as a member of a team is not just a problem displayed by new recruits but one that ‘cuts through the fabric of some societies’. Many parents, employers, and other adults do not
Acquisition of employability skills should begin in the formative years of a child's life. Thomas Lickona advocates that the focus at the Primary level should not be only on the 3R's but on 5R's inclusive of RESPECT and RESPONSIBILITY. He states that they are necessary for:

- healthy and personal development
- caring and interpersonal relationships
- a humane and democratic society and,
- a just and peaceful world.

The writer believes that a well designed public education programme should be mounted to assist not only graduates but the general public to understand the importance of employability skills.

It is important that emphasis be placed on improving the employability of graduates. “Employability skills give people not only the means with which to make a living but also the wherewithal to live a meaningful life”.

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