The development of employability skills in novice workers through employment

*Erica Smith and Paul Comyn*

This chapter* reports on a research study which aimed to find out how teenage workers developed their employability skills in their first formal jobs. With young people in Australia commencing formal part-time work as early as thirteen or fourteen years of age (and even younger in some cases), employability skills are not necessarily developed at school. Many young people are gaining these skills primarily through their part-time jobs while they are at school or in their first jobs.

The research was based on case studies which were carried out during mid-2002 in twelve Australian enterprises of varying size and drawn from different industry areas (including three group training companies). The enterprises were located in four states—New South Wales, Victoria, South Australia, Victoria and Queensland—and included examples of first-time workers who were part-time student workers as well as school-leavers in their first jobs.

The study found that employers of young people accepted their role in helping these young people to develop their employability skills and saw the benefits of doing so. This chapter highlights the range of approaches which employers use to encourage the development of these skills. The study confirms the importance of the workplace as a site for learning and developing employability skills.

The term used in the study for young workers in their first formal job was ‘novice workers’.

**Introduction**

The aim of this study was to find out:

- why some organisations recruit large numbers of novice workers and how such employers view young workers

---

* A summary of the report *The development of employability skills in novice workers* (Smith & Comyn 2003).
what processes are in place at corporate, managerial and supervisory levels to train these novice workers in employability skills

how novice workers themselves view, and engage in, learning about employability skills through employment

elements of good models of employability skills training.

The following list of employability skills and attributes drawn up by the Business Council of Australia and the Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry (2002) was used as the basis for the research.

**Employability skills and attributes**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Attributes</th>
<th>Skills</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>loyalty</td>
<td>communication skills that contribute to productive and harmonious relations across employees and customers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>commitment</td>
<td>team work skills that contribute to productive working relationships and outcomes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>honesty and integrity</td>
<td>problem-solving skills that contribute to productive outcomes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>enthusiasm</td>
<td>initiative and enterprise skills that contribute to innovative outcomes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>reliability</td>
<td>planning and organising skills that contribute to long and short term strategic planning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>personal presentation</td>
<td>self-management skills that contribute to employee satisfaction and growth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>common sense</td>
<td>learning skills that contribute to ongoing improvement and expansion in employee and company operations and outcomes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>technology skills that contribute to effective execution of tasks</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


The research involved interviews with employers/human resources managers, site managers, supervisors of novice workers, novice workers and their co-workers in 12 enterprises. These 12 enterprises were indicative of the range of workplaces in which novice workers (those who have not had previous formal work) are employed. The case studies are listed in table 1. Three group training companies were selected, as these organisations are major employers of school-leavers and student–workers in apprenticeships and traineeships. The host employers ‘lease’ the apprentices and trainees from the group training company which remains the legal employer.
Table 1: Details of case study sites

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Employer</th>
<th>Industry area</th>
<th>State</th>
<th>Full-time/part-time novice workers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Superfoods*</td>
<td>Supermarket</td>
<td>NSW</td>
<td>Both</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MEGT</td>
<td>GTC</td>
<td>Vic.</td>
<td>Only full-time examined</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Autolight Manufacturing*</td>
<td>Manufacturing</td>
<td>SA</td>
<td>Only full-time examined</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Courier Newspapers*</td>
<td>Newspaper delivery</td>
<td>SA</td>
<td>Part-time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bakers Delight</td>
<td>Retail food</td>
<td>SA</td>
<td>Both</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Portside Group Training*</td>
<td>GTC</td>
<td>SA</td>
<td>Both</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Market-town Council*</td>
<td>Local government</td>
<td>NSW</td>
<td>Full-time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hamburger House*</td>
<td>Fast food</td>
<td>Vic.</td>
<td>Both</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fiona’s Hair Salon</td>
<td>Hairdressing</td>
<td>NSW</td>
<td>Full-time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supernova Electrical*</td>
<td>Electrical</td>
<td>NSW</td>
<td>Full-time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sound Fits</td>
<td>Electronics/IT</td>
<td>NSW</td>
<td>Full-time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CADET</td>
<td>GTC</td>
<td>Qld</td>
<td>Part-time</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: * Indicates pseudonym; GTC = group training company; IT = information technology.

Why do employers recruit novice workers?

Table 2 lists the main reasons why the companies liked to hire novice workers. There was variation among organisations but these themes were mentioned by most.

Table 2: Reasons for hiring novice workers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reason</th>
<th>Explanation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Low cost</td>
<td>Industrial awards and enterprise agreements allow for lower wages for workers up to the age of 18.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enthusiasm</td>
<td>Novice workers possess youthful exuberance which lifts morale in the workplace as well as presenting a good image to customers.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mouldability</td>
<td>Novice workers do not bring bad habits with them and can be trained in company procedures and socialised into company mores.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Technological skills and up-to-date knowledge</td>
<td>Novice workers have good computer skills, and (for apprentices and trainees) bring up-to-date techniques and knowledge from their off-the-job training.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fresh views and ideas</td>
<td>Novice workers offer different ways of looking at workplace issues.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community obligations</td>
<td>Employers wish to ‘do the right thing’ by giving young people a chance.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Industry obligations</td>
<td>Employers wish to maintain industry skill levels by bringing on new workers.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enterprise skill mix</td>
<td>Novice workers fill low-skill jobs.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Operating hours</td>
<td>Novice workers (especially student–workers) are available for non-standard working hours.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tradition</td>
<td>Some employers have a long tradition of employing apprentices.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physical fitness</td>
<td>Novice workers have stamina and are able to do hard physical work.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organisation image</td>
<td>Novice workers present a youthful image which is an important marketing tool.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Staff development</td>
<td>Supervision and training of novice workers provides valuable experience for existing staff.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The employers’ views of novice workers were more positive than those found in other research (for example, Cregan 1997), and there was also more of a sense of obligation to the community and the industry in their hiring decisions than has been reported in the literature, apart from literature on apprenticeship (for example, Smith 1998). Many of the managers and staff interviewed expressed great satisfaction in their role whereby they took on raw recruits and turned them into effective workers.

Some employers preferred to recruit young people with fairly well developed employability skills while others, particularly those recruiting younger teenagers, accepted that their new staff would have very low levels of skills.

Employee attitudes to novice workers

Employers found a number of positive attributes among their novice workers, such as ‘willingness to learn’, ‘keen’ and ‘interested in career development’, as well as the fact that novice workers were grateful for the chance of a job and wanted to impress. Employers also mentioned some negative attributes. The major negative attributes were as follows:

❖ difficulty in adjusting to full-time work from a school environment—length of working day, lack of structure compared with school timetable, lack of experience in taking the initiative
❖ for younger student–workers, difficulty in viewing work as a serious activity rather than a setting for social interactions
❖ impingement of personal matters upon work—transport problems, relationship difficulties, occasionally drug or alcohol difficulties
❖ poor communication skills (basically shyness)
❖ lack of basic work skills, like the need to keep the working environment clean
❖ lack of a ‘big picture’ understanding of the operation of a business
❖ unwillingness to ask questions if unsure
❖ lack of understanding of the impression they are making on other workers.

The presence of positive and negative attributes alike varied among novice workers, and employers were careful to point out the diversity of their novice workers.

Interviewees described some examples of ineffective novice workers as follows:

We had a long talk with her and tried to focus on the need for reliability, the need for us to be able to give her a task and know that it actually happens, the need to know that she’s going to turn up in the morning. Since then she’s had more days
off than she did before. She’s up to seven days in a row of not attending … I
don’t know how sick you would have to be, you’d have to be dying to take seven
days off.  
(MEGT manager)

If you gave this guy one task he could do it, that’s what I’ve been told, if you
gave him two things to do he couldn’t do it.  
(MEGT novice worker)

Despite some occasional bad experiences of this nature, most employers
remained positive about their novice workers and actively enjoyed the process
of turning them from raw recruits into confident workers. Three quotations
from the case studies illustrate this:

I like to take them on because I will be a major influence on them throughout their
life. They will reflect back on it one day and say ‘Gee, I learned a lot from …’
(Hamburger House manager)

With any luck what we teach him now is going to stay with him.
(Sound Fits manager)

When you look back after six months at the same child, they’re totally different,
they’ve blossomed and they smile more often, and that’s important too when
they’re dealing with people, they’re less nervous.  
(MEGT manager)

Most commonly valued employability skills

Opinions about the employability skills and attributes that were the most
important for novice workers in an enterprise varied across the case studies and
also within the case studies among different groups of workers. However, there
was a clear consensus that team work and communication were the most
commonly valued employability skills; and reliability, a sense of humour and
enthusiasm were the most commonly valued attributes.

What processes do organisation use to develop employability skills?

Formal processes

A number of formal processes were used by organisations to develop
employability skills in their novice workers. The approaches most commonly
used were: induction, buddying, valuing training, allocating increasing
responsibility and task rotation. These are discussed below.

Induction

Induction processes were almost universal, variously involving booklets, training
sessions and one-to-one discussions. The development of employability skills was
either explicitly addressed, or assumed to have resulted from the particular
approach. At CADET group training company for example, novice workers (trainees) were provided with two lists entitled ‘Employer expectations’ and ‘Ten commandments for customers’. These materials were used to describe required attitudes and behaviours, and were part of a system of fortnightly monitoring by group training company staff during the first month of employment.

Some novice workers were seen to need more induction than others. Hamburger House, for example, paid a great deal of attention to induction, perhaps because most of their novice workers were very young (15 or younger). Playford Council (Portside Group Training Company host employer) routinely recruited Indigenous apprentices and found them to be shyer than other young people, hence requiring more care in induction. Some employers commenced the development of employability skills during the selection interview, setting out their expectations of prospective workers.

Buddy and mentoring systems

At most sites, efforts were made to partner or ‘buddy’ novice workers with others. These might be co-workers or supervisors/team leaders, depending on the organisation of work in the enterprise and the skills of available personnel. One Bakers Delight manager commented that the most effective way to develop the employability skills of novice workers was to team novice workers with a carefully selected experienced staff member who could model appropriate behaviour. The buddy also helped to integrate the new person socially.

Socialisation

Steps to acculturate novice workers were seen as relevant to the development of employability skills, particularly team work and communication skills. While this was predominantly a feature of induction processes, it was also achieved through the use of social events which were part of an ensemble of approaches to introduce novice workers to an enterprise. At Superfoods for example, great care was taken during induction to introduce novice workers into the history and culture of the organisation, with its associated tradition and commitment to quality service and products.

Valuing of training

At a number of sites, the development and maintenance of a training culture was seen as relevant to developing the employability skills of novice workers, particularly in terms of their commitment and learning skills. It was felt that, through emphasising learning, novice workers would be encouraged to consider their own skills development which would then include employability skills. At Market-town Council for example, novice workers were involved in ongoing structured training programs.
Training supervisors in how to develop employability skills

At a number of sites, targeted training was seen as a way of ensuring that supervisors had the skills to assist the development of employability skills amongst novice workers for whom they were responsible. At Hamburger House, for example, such training was a vital part of supervisory training and was being upgraded at the time of the case study.

Staff meetings

Regular staff meetings were used at a number of sites to create opportunities to develop teamwork and sometimes involved training events incorporating employability skills. For example, at Fiona’s Art of Hair, informal case studies and scenarios were used to develop employability skills and procedural skills amongst all staff.

Staff assessments and performance appraisal systems

Appraisal systems both for novice workers and for their managers could be useful aids to the development of employability skills in novice workers. Three enterprises mentioned formal staff appraisal systems. At Supernova Electrical, novice workers were involved in a formal assessment and performance review system which used self-assessment and assessments by supervisors and site managers against criteria which included both technical and employability skills. At Hamburger House, managers’ performance indicators included their ability to develop employability skills in their young staff.

Dealing with mistakes

At some sites, mistakes were explicitly recognised as providing a means to address aspects of a novice worker’s performance, aspects that often drew attention to the deployment of employability skills. At Sound Fits for example, the owner–managers were consciously tolerant of mistakes, using them as learning opportunities. This approach is line with the organisational learning literature (for example, Field & Ford 1995).

Conflict resolution

At some of the enterprises, a mixture of formal and informal mechanisms for conflict resolution were considered relevant to the development of employability skills. These processes were seen as relevant as many of the issues surrounding the points of conflict related to inadequately developed employability skills and attitudes. At Supernova Electrical for example, the operations manager had introduced a system through which any conflicts on site would be resolved through a process involving supervisors, the site
foreman, managers and ultimately parents—if the issue was serious enough to warrant their involvement. Through this approach, elements of the employability skills of novice workers were highlighted, if relevant, during the conflict resolution process as a means of preventing further conflicts on site.

Disciplinary approaches

For similar reasons, disciplinary approaches were also seen as being relevant to the development of employability skills. The use of penalties, a lack of shifts, and simply ‘putting them back in their box’ were some techniques used to draw attention to under-developed employability attributes, such as reliability or motivation. At Bakers Delight for example, a high standard of performance was required, and if another novice worker showed more energy and drive, then individuals were expected to improve or they would lose shifts. Similarly, if they chose not to turn up for a shift, they were not offered work for the following two weeks.

Rotation of tasks

Several of the enterprises sought to rotate novice workers so that they would be exposed to different staff members as well as to a different range of work tasks and work systems. This practice was also seen as a way of exposing novice workers to the ‘big picture’. While generally not used specifically to develop skills, there was an overall expectation that task rotation would develop such skills of novice workers. At Hamburger House for example, managers used this technique when novice workers were observed becoming less enthusiastic after the first few weeks of work. Training in new tasks was seen as an explicit strategy to keep novice workers motivated while helping them to understand how their role fitted in with the total operation. Managers at Hamburger House were aware that, when novice workers were given a wider range of tasks, they learned more quickly.

Allocating increasing responsibility

All sites used approaches that sought to gradually increase the level of responsibility for novice workers. This approach was seen not only to develop work skills but also to provide novice workers with opportunities to develop related employability skills. At Property Co. (CADET group training company host employer) in a school-based traineeship the trainee was moved from basic tasks, for example, mailouts, to answering the phone and typing.

Badging

A simple technique mentioned by Bakers Delight was to use badges to identify novice workers. The expectation amongst employers and supervisors was that
clients and customers would be more tolerant of the level of service and indeed encourage novice workers. In this way, it was felt that novice workers might be more comfortable in their work environment and thus more likely to grow as individuals and utilise appropriate employability skills.

Informal techniques for encouraging the development of employability skills

Individual interactions which were effective in encouraging the development of employability skills included giving praise and encouragement, communicating regularly and modelling desired behaviour at work. Examples of informal techniques in action are described below.

Encouraging and giving praise one to one

At Superfoods for example, effective supervisors were viewed by senior management to be those who took time to encourage and give praise to novice workers.

Talking and making conversation in an effort to make novice workers feel comfortable

A manager at Frankston Hospital (MEGT host employer) said that he made a point to have an informal discussion with novice workers at least once a day, and chose appropriate co-workers who were prepared to spend time talking, during which time tips about work could be passed on. At Supernova Electrical a site manager made a point of developing a rapport with novice workers by maintaining interest in their personal lives and asking how they were progressing on the job.

Introducing them to the group

At Hamburger House, supervisors recognised the importance of effectively introducing novice workers into the work group on site. They hired and inducted novice workers in groups so that they were able to develop relationships with co-workers prior to moving to the workplace.

Showing respect

At Bayview (MEGT) novice workers were shown respect by managers and other co-workers in a way which encouraged the novice workers and eased their transition into employment.
Showing concern and empathy

At Kaylene Krantz (Portside Group Training Company host employer), the manager believed she had the responsibility to nurture novice workers and tried to demonstrate considerable empathy for young people. One of the MEGT field workers took pains to keep up to date with youth culture and asked the apprentices to approach him about any problem, however serious.

Setting clear limits

At Bakers Delight, franchisees were focused on giving novice workers clear guidance on what standards were required at work. Novice workers were instructed that strict systems were in place which had to be adhered to. At Superfoods, managers took pains to ensure that clear feedback was given to novice workers.

Working alongside novice workers and doing the same jobs

In some case studies supervisors routinely worked alongside novice workers, in the process getting novice workers to tell stories about their day and showing them easier ways of doing particular tasks.

Socialising to share experiences

At Hamburger House supervisors and managers joined novice staff on their breaks.

Modelling correct behaviour and setting a good example

At Superfoods and Sound Fits, supervisors who worked directly with novice workers said that they were conscious of needing to set a good example and modified their own behaviour to do so.

Using humour

At Sound Fits, humour was seen as an important tool, especially in situations where mistakes had been made or where the novice worker needed to be ‘brought into line’. The use of humour defused such situations and contributed to the novice worker feeling at ease in the workplace.

How do novice workers learn employability skills?

Novice workers themselves used a range of approaches to develop their own employability skills which were mainly based around proactive communication.
They asked questions, practised active listening, sought out more helpful staff as mentors, developed working relationships with managers and mixed socially with other staff. They also sought to make a good impression, smiling a lot, turning up to work early, asking for extra tasks, seeking feedback, and learning when to offer suggestions and when to keep quiet. They developed systems for organising their work and took advantage of off-the-job training opportunities. Novice workers who had not kept their jobs or had not developed in their jobs were those who had failed to prioritise work above home life, and workers who had been afraid to ask questions for fear of appearing stupid. The consequences of not asking questions were always much worse than the consequences of asking questions.

Participants in the study were asked to make suggestions for a new novice worker to follow. Their responses focused mainly on communication skills and included advice, such as allowing time to fit into the work group, keeping a note book to jot down ideas, accepting criticism as constructive, and looking at the way in which different people work in order to compare different work practices. As well as developing their employability skills per se, this sort of advice would help novice workers become trusted and valued, and hence would encourage other staff to invest time training them.

Although the project only set out to examine workplace issues, several other factors which assisted in the development of employability skills were mentioned by interviewees. These included school and extra-curricular activities which were undertaken before starting work (or in the case of student–workers, concurrently with work). Interviewees also drew attention to the importance of their parents and training providers (where formal contracts of training were involved) in helping to develop employability skills.

Good models of employability skills development

The research found that the most effective models for developing employability skills were generally formal—although a crucial ingredient in them all was having an environment which supported and nurtured the young people. The workplaces most effective in developing employability skills were those which had:

- **Comprehensive training systems**: systems for developing technical skills were also generally effective in developing employability skills.

- **Regular team meetings**: these involved new workers in the organisation and could also be used specifically to address employability skills issues of interest to all staff, not only new staff.

- **Performance management approach**: the performance management systems for junior staff foregrounded employability skills, and the performance indicators for managers foregrounded their role in developing employability skills in novice workers.
Third-party approach: exemplified by, but not restricted to, group training companies, third parties could provide an additional source of employability skills development as well as intervening in difficult situations.

Buddying or mentoring systems: pairing the new worker either with a co-worker or a more senior member of staff was highly effective, as long as the partner was selected carefully.

Supportive environment: whatever formal systems were in place, one of the most important features of a workplace where employability skills were well developed was its supportive nature. Tolerance and respect were the two key factors.

As a result of the research, four additional models were proposed:

A 'work experience' model: preparing employers for a novice worker in much the same way as they are prepared for hosting a work experience student would assist the employer in understanding what a novice worker’s needs were and how employability skills could most effectively and most speedily be developed.

Individual induction programs: encouraging employers of novice workers to develop six-month plans for their new staff would enable a range of experiences and opportunities for feedback to be planned.

Project learning: engaging novice workers in authentic but small projects which are of immediate use to the workplace could improve novice workers’ confidence.

Training or information for supervisors and co-workers: structured training for supervisors, buddies, co-workers in dealing with novice workers and developing their employability skills would be valuable. Such training needs to include an understanding of what it is like to begin working life, as well as suggested processes for assisting the development of employability skills. If no time is available for training, short summary training kits could be provided to staff. It was noted during the research that staff working with novice workers reported a range of methods by which they had learned to undertake the role effectively, but there was little standardisation of learning procedures except in large companies which routinely recruited large numbers of teenagers.

Advantages to employers of paying attention to employability skills development

The case studies showed that employers recognised that they would benefit if they encouraged the development of employability skills in their novice workers. Making novice workers more effective more quickly would lead to an
improved bottom line through higher productivity and fewer mistakes. There would be a more pleasant working environment, fewer disputes, reduced absenteeism and lower labour turnover. Good programs for novice workers would build a good reputation for the organisation, attracting further, good-quality, novice workers. The better novice workers might be retained for medium-term careers and even long-term careers in management. Finally, the case studies showed that there was a great deal of satisfaction afforded to managers, supervisors and co-workers through seeing a novice worker become confident, happy and effective in a workplace.

It could be argued that if novice workers were to come ‘ready made’ with employability skills, some of these outcomes would still be achieved. However, it is actually the transformation from raw recruit to confident worker which creates the satisfaction in the eyes of many employers. Moreover, the process of good employability skills development creates loyalty in the novice workers, leading to retention and to a good reputation (for the organisation) which attracts further cohorts of novice workers. These issues are very important to those employers who need to recruit large numbers of novice workers for operational reasons, such as extended hours of trading or the need for low-cost labour.

Why are workplaces important in employability skills development?

Although employability skills may be developed through a range of activities and at a variety of locations, there are reasons why workplaces are appropriate, and even vitally important sites for their development. Employability skills are developed throughout one’s working life and hence employers need to view the process of employability skills development as a whole-of-workforce issue. Good practices for new workers should be accompanied by good practices for all workers.

The range of employability skills possessed by young workers starting their first jobs varies greatly. Some may have well-developed skills and others, sometimes through no fault of their own, poorly developed skills. Employers need to be prepared for the full range, particularly when they are recruiting younger teenagers and in a tight labour market where they cannot ‘pick and choose’.

Employability skills are context-bound in that different industries and employers value and weight the skills and attributes quite differently. Hence there are sound economic reasons for employers contributing to the cost of their development. Moreover, the worth of employability skills can only be fully appreciated in the workplace where the consequences of such skills can be seen.

There was little indication from the research that many employers desired novice workers to be any different from the way they were already. Employers accepted that, in employing a teenager who had never worked before, they
would have to allocate both effort and resources into making the employee a functioning worker. The suggested approaches for fostering and encouraging the development of employability skills in young workers do not represent a radical departure from existing practice; they are more of a reminder to extend such practices to more workplaces and to make more routine and understood the strategies which already exist.

**Conclusion**

The study showed that some Australian employers are already devoting considerable resources to the development of employability skills in their novice workers. The greater the propensity of the organisation to recruit young staff, the more likely it is that the development of employability skills plays a central part in its human resource management and training practices. Far from resenting the time and resources devoted to this task, managers and supervisors appear both to enjoy the task of working with young people and to recognise that it is an important part of their role as managers to undertake this task effectively. Organisations which do not routinely recruit novice workers appear less well prepared to manage such staff on the occasions when they do recruit them, and may require assistance to undertake the task effectively. This chapter has highlighted the most effective methods which were identified during the research, and has suggested a number of additional methods.

**References**


Cregan, C 1997, *What’s happened to the labour market for school leavers in Britain?*, Melbourne University Department of Management & Industrial Relations, working paper 108, Melbourne University, Melbourne.


**Acknowledgements**

The authors would like to thank the other members of the research team, Sue Erickson and Dawn Edwards.