EMPLOYABILITY: REAL POTENTIAL OR VIRTUAL REALITY?

If we are gathered here today it is certainly that employability, more than a concern, constitutes for us a battlefield, a professional challenge that mobilizes all our resources, expertise, competencies according to a philosophy of mankind and institutions whose mission is to transform our society and contribute actively to the good of each and everyone.

Employability is our struggle, the drive to many of our operational plans. As trainers, consultants, training institutions, managers and CEOs we never stop to be challenged by this concept, to try to make it tangible and real. But what is IT? Is employability a concept, a reality, a capacity, a state of mind, an attitude, a competency, a philosophy, a potential to actualise, an utopia? Is employability simply a question of acquisition and development of competencies through time across functional levels? Is it simply about obtaining, maintaining and enriching one’s job? Is it about the mobility one can demonstrate across jobs and organizations? Is it dependant upon the individual for the most part, or upon the company, or upon a political drive, or productivity gurus? Where does employability start, what is its journey and its finality once started?

In my opinion the key question is the following: is employability a battle where victory can not be conquered, where one will always be a victim, irrespective to one’s choice of fighting or not? What if employability for both the employer and the employee, is in fact a trap? Is employability a real potential or a virtual reality?

In sharing my views on this, I propose that we hear what managers and employees say about employability in their organisations. We will hear about practical views and current sayings that challenge our beliefs on employability. I will then risk my own comments on the barriers, paradox, and possibilities encountered. I will underline the key factors in influencing employability at an individual level, at company and national levels, and finally will propose my views on a strategy for employability.
Let us step out of our helicopter, and follow a mouse track to hear what is being said in companies by management and employees across level. This will enable us to be even more aware of the gap that exists between our convictions on employability and the grass root reality, at least in Mauritius and based upon my own professional experience.

**WHAT I HEAR MANAGERS SAY**

What will drive a company to develop the employability of all or part of its manpower, and implement a training programme? Let us hear what managers do say:

“Our last board meeting was entirely about how we could invest in our human capital. We have to focus all our resources on this to achieve the reopening of our hotel. What can we do to upgrade our staff and build their capacity after so many years of service? How are we going to reposition their services and competencies so that our investment will not be wasted? If ever they fail to improve, we will pay a costly price. How are we going to get rid of an old mindset whilst not demotivating our employees with our increased expectations, and the accrued effort we want them to bring in their work? We may lose them; in fact we have to think of a way of retaining only those who add real value to the company. How are we going to train people that are, let’s face it, ‘untrainable’. We need to review our entry level in our company several notches up if we are to maintain our positioning, otherwise we will have the same problem in less than 3 years. And we will be out of the leaders pool.”

A management team was telling me recently:

“We no more attract high calibre recruits. We only have low-level candidates. However our label is one of the very best, but we no more attract the best. Where have we gone wrong? Those who join us are out of the box in a flash. Those who stay do not have the potential. It seems that everybody wants to leave for the competitors even if they are less renowned. Our Training
Academy is not much of a help. Training our people boils down to loosing them to other companies at the end. Those who leave us become the No. 1 elsewhere, although we do not recognize them as being fit for the job here. Why have we been unable to detect their capacities? It is clear that our company is a good label… for the others.”

Managers of a sugar estate were saying:

“We need to ask more from our staff, to have higher productivity than ever, to manage performance and maximize production. What performance management system do we need that fits our company? We can no more accept that someone cannot take 100% responsibility in his job, and cannot contribute towards our goals. We need a complete change of mindset. How are we going to succeed in that when our company culture poses a problem, while the whole concept is anew to our managers?”

A recruiting consultancy firm was telling me:

“We need to be more specialized, to be more competent to create a competitive edge versus our competitors. We need to develop new expertise.”

A world leader in cement manufacturing reflected that they needed to recruit only the best potential across levels in their company. The management was saying that:

“We can no more afford to wake up three or six months after hiring a candidate and discover he no longer can do the job because he lacks potential, cannot adapt to stressful situations, time constraints, team work, etc and contribute to our organization. We have had to negotiate certain departures and that cost us energy and money. Be it mechanics, helpers, accountants, managers we must be sure of the potential of our people and we need expert help on this issue. We also need to assess our existing human resources potential.”

Another leader in the tourism industry was saying:

“Our most important issue is about middle management! How can we develop and upgrade them, for they are the future of our company; and if they are not up to it, the base will not be up to it either. We have a big issue of competencies and mindset here.”
It seems, hearing all these views of management, that employability is a victorious battle as forces of change are such that organizations seem to have no choice than to leverage their human resources in order to achieve growth.

**WHAT I HEAR EMPLOYEES SAY**

Nevertheless we must now ask why would an individual decide to develop his employability and undergo a training programme? Let us hear what the employees have to say.

A manager of a sugar estate:

“I want to learn and grow, but unfortunately the sky is far from being the limit. Where to go? Learn, undergo a training, okay, but for what return from the company? I expect a salary increase if I learn and achieve new qualifications and take on additional responsibilities, but why take on this route if I end up doing more with no reward or benefits!”

NATO: No actions, talk only:

“The bosses say a lot, but nothing changes. Here the older staff feels that they have passed their best before date, that they are no longer needed or valued. The younger ones are growing fast. Instead of matching youth with experience so that experience can access concepts and new techniques, whereas youth can access knowledge and practical skills, the older staff is pushed aside and forgotten, as if we do not provide any value to the company.”

Workers from a hotel:

“We have been asking for training for 25 years and it has never happened. What has the company ever done for us!”

A manager from a leading bank of Mauritius:
“No managers have ever told me what studies I should undertake. My decision was based on my personal interests.”

Other junior employees:

“I do not know the needs and expectations of my department. My manager has never talked to me about development needs or future studies. If the company’s direction is clear, it does not affect the way we do business at departmental level.”

Staff from different companies:

“I have reached my top. I will not be able to rise further. In the future, I will stay in the same position, unless I leave this company. Nothing is planned for me and I know that it is not me that they wish to promote to higher level; they will prefer someone more like them.”

Staff from all level in hotel services:

“It is up to the boss to determine where the company is heading. I do my job and that is it. My supervisor does not accept any ideas that are not his, so I have stopped sharing my thoughts, though I do know ways to improve the job. It is certainly demotivating.”

“Why is it that it is only when we leave the company, that we suddenly hear we are needed and have a future here. All this time, why was I not valued!”

Two Head of department in marketing:

“It is only in the last two years that we have progressed in our job. Still there is a long road to travel before we stop acting only as higher-level pawns in the game. Today we do take more responsibility for our actions, but it still depends a lot on the boss’s moods.”
Other typical comments from employees:

“This training should also apply to our managers. There is no point in training us if they maintain the status quo afterwards. Where are they? Why aren’t they part of this training programme?”

Expectations at an individual level are diametrically opposed to management’s expectations. They indicate another reality in which employability appears precarious, problematic, jeopardised by the organisation’s very movers and shakers.

**Mindsets that block the way:**

There is a very disseminate but subtle mindset across organizations that opposes the positive management’s needs described through what managers say. When management agrees to run a training programme, one may hear comments like:

“Most of the people going through this training programme are near to hopeless cases. It is a waste of time and money. We know only too well that there is not much we could expect from them.”

“This training is what we need. I have been struggling for a couple of years for something like this to happen in our company. However, how can we free our people for two consecutive days when taking holidays is already big issue here?”

“I really want to train my staff, but on one condition, that their salary does not come into the equation. I don’t want them to think that they are too big for their boots. If I train them, they will ask for a salary increase, so it’s best that everything remains status quo, anyway it is not the appropriate time to train the staff.”
“Be careful, if we give them access to training they will leave our company as soon as they have acquired knowledge and know-how. They must be legally bind to the company for at least 5 years if we offer to train them.”

“There is no training plan for our employees to achieve Masters and Post Graduate levels, as sponsoring such studies will be very costly for the organisation. And, after all what will these employees learn more from the degree.”

“We would need to understand the personality traits as well as the potential of the people applying or currently employed, but we don’t have the time for that.”

“Things have always been like that in our company, and it works; why change?”

“The whole team or all the employees participate in a training, but not once has the Head of Department come to see what is going on.”

“There’s a necessity to constantly innovate, to find new solutions, but we have never done things like that, and therefore it can’t work because it would create a big increase in our workload. We are already stretched to the limit and we don’t want to create more stress.”

“We would like to be the best and therefore we must recruit the ‘best of the best’, but nothing is done internally to set up professional recruitment techniques and tools.”

“The board of Directors has defined our vision, and this morning our employees have just been informed through electronic mail about this vision. There was no explanatory or informative notes attached to it”

“In training sessions regrouping all the various managerial levels, the only ones that never come or who leave these training sessions before the end, are our head-of-departments. But they are always there to receive their certificates.”
EMPLOYABILITY: WHAT CAN I TELL?

A CATCH-22 SITUATION

Employability is in fact like a tight rope that bounces from side to side, sometimes to the positive side and at other times to a more fragile or negative side. Walking along this tight rope is never easy. It is a trap in the sense that if I do not climb this rope, I will never reach its far end and if I do take it, I may fall and not reach the top.

If I don’t develop my employability, there are serious risks that: I might be among the first to go should a reorganisation take place; that I might not be promoted; that I might not be trained. If I am employable there are risks that I might not see my objectives be materialised, that I might not be promoted as deserved, and I would have to look for new employers or to be satisfied with a very frustrating situation. There is always a moment where the employability that we give ourselves, will exceed the boundaries of the job.

As employer, if I don’t enhance the employability of my fellow associates, my company will lose in productivity and competitiveness. Eventually, the company will have to bear a high social cost through restructuring, high labour turnover, and high number of vacancies. The employee’s morale will be very low and their loyalty will be severely hit leading to the company witnessing the frequent departures of the best.

On the other hand, developing employability means financial investment, reviewing of management systems, acquisition of competencies that must be rewarded, creating expectations & expertise, improving staff morale, on going up-to-date communication & continuous evolutionary change in our management style. The major hiccup is that we must indulge in all this without ascertaining success at the end of the journey. Beware! Troubles ahead!!
KEY INDIVIDUAL FACTORS FOR EMPLOYABILITY

The individual employability depends on multiple inter-dependent factors:

PERSONALITY:

This refers to the Character (innate) with our right or left cerebral preferences, as well as our stable behavioural characteristics across situations and time.

EDUCATION:

(Acquired) This refers to the influences we received from role models, parents, educators and the standards, principles and norms we assimilated and understood.

REAL LIFE EXPERIENCE:

This refers to the positioning of our relationship in reference to the world and to others – different social styles.

CAPACITY:

This refers to the cognitive potential that enables us to realise our aptitudes – the capacity being an aptitude (power) in action (realisation).

EXPERIENCE/SPECIALISED COMPETENCIES:

This refers to the knowledge, specialist skills and behaviours, we developed, worked, and put at the forefront.

QUALIFICATION:

This refers to the level of knowledge achieved as certified by institutions.
SELF:

This refers to this inner centre where our fundamental options take place and drive our decisions and behaviours, and mobilise our resources and capacities.

The external factors like opportunities, crisis and all the different socio, politico, economical projects will have also a key impact on how will the individual direct his employability.

EMPLOYABILITY STRATEGY

Unless we play on all the factors at the same time and do that very proactively, that is as soon as an individual needs to be taken care of by the family, the community, the society, the various institutions and the political instances, the employability will greatly suffer.

Why should we bother to make efforts, why should we sacrifice our comfort, our family life to be more trained and increase our employability if at the end, there is no professional and personal positive outcomes?

More so, how can we expect individuals to develop their employability if the society, the family, the community, the political instances and the industries have not been able to generate projects that have a strong purpose, audacious goals, that would embodied their choices and all their internal resources.

The challenge of employability— like the training challenge - cannot be external to the human being. To commit the latter, we need to meet his fundamental needs and give him a sense of purpose, value his contribution and his participation.

We need to set goals that would make him passionate and committed. He needs to be reassured simultaneously on his financial and material needs. These will be mutually reinforcing and will
establish the congruency of the approach, will create the pillars of his personal employability. The contract of employment can be limited in time – we go more and more on two years renewable contracts – but the intensity and the added value brought in by such a committed individual is crucial to the company.

We are in an era of super/cyber/live theatre: from reality TV shows, scratch and win now, live radio gifts through to a multiple choice of immediate information sources, live wars, video conferences, e-banking, e-commerce; which influence our society and our culture. However, in our organisations, we are in another dimension. If the former agree that there is a necessity to communicate, they often do otherwise internally. There are companies that favour: secret organigramme, fringe benefits with ambiguous scales and irrational beneficiaries, employees maintained in the dark, decisions and values not properly defined, financial results given but profit margin kept secret, surprise promotion schemes together with layoffs, subjective performance objectives, random and erratic selection criteria, etc.

The industries offer products and services that help in the realisation of major technical progress changing the behavioural model of individuals, and therefore make these individuals less capable of identifying themselves to the industries’ games and structure. There is a gap between what is possible and accessible outside the industry and what is experienced inside our companies. It is evident that this gap is found in the individual.

How can a country promote the uprising of intellect, of individualities, how does it shape the cognitive capacity of his population; how does it provide with a proper education system that would stimulate in a very positive way our cerebral preferences, our cognitive potential, successful behaviours and knowledge?

I was in a training mission in Africa for the account of a company that had just got out of the communist system and that had been recently privatised. Two very dramatic shocks for the employees of this company. Out of 40 senior/middle top managers, 38 had demonstrated a strong left cerebral preference. We all know that the analysis, logical, rational, sequential and
technical capacity centres of an individual are located in the left cortex. And on the other hand, that the right cortex is the creative, emotional, innovative capacity centre.

I think that there are here all the proper elements for a university research project based on the hypothesis that the system of this African country –perhaps Africa- promotes the development of left-brain people. The tribal system, the strong hierarchy sense, the political system with an important segmentation of responsibilities, the respect of authority, the conservatism and finally the codified responsibility given to the head of the family or the clan concur to this. You can well imagine how this could weaken the capacity of an individual to adapt himself to an entrepreneurial spirit of productivity and creativity.

We know that a cerebral right or left preference conditions our taste and our professional choices as well as our cognitive capacities that we would grow. To be naturally gifted in succeeding in x-y-z domains does not mean however that we exclude all the other a-b-c ones. The opportunities and business will shape the orientations that we choose to make from our preferences.

It is the duty of decision makers to shape and influence these opportunities and the future business orientations in order to allow the emergence of the minds, skills, capacities and people needed by industries and the nation.

In Mauritius, I have noted that there is a better equilibrium between the left and the right utilisation of the cortex. Nonetheless, which culture of the mind are we encouraging to emerge? If we think about it, we are among those who create our own future by what we project as visionary capacity or that weakens our future by our lack of vision and projects.

KENNEDY’S VISION.

Let us see how Kennedy’s visionary leadership who announced: “We are going to walk on the moon because we can do it and be the first to do it”, changed the destiny of an entire nation. To respond to such a dream, all the technical, scientific and economical capabilities were put together with one and same passion.
Together with huge investment in research, the need to train and to “create” technicians, scientists, managers and intellectuals became a priority. Education and training curriculum were irremediably changed together with the working habits and job preferences of professionals. New job opportunities occurred, new jobs were created, new industries appeared and foremost all the structures of the country were put together so that 10 years afterwards this vision was now a reality.

Let us question ourselves on how the absence of rock-solid projects for a nation highly hijacks the employability of an entire nation. If one does not get expose, early enough, through the educational structures and infrastructures, to the projects of the future, one will not be able to gather internal resources helping him to relate to the future. How will he, as a professional, attain considerable heights if there exists like a cultural deficit at his level, following that of the nation? We must not lose sight of the fact that the future decision makers will be amongst those who will suffer from this deficit.

OUR VISION: THE MAURITIAN DREAM

How can we shape the decision makers’ mindsets to put their companies in the forefront, to give a clear and strong direction to all their employees? We have at present the Cyber City, a formidable challenge that can endow the nation with the vision required to transform our infrastructure and organisations, and permit the jobs of the future, intellect, skills, individuals and mindsets that the nation require to surface.
Like Kennedy’s example, just imagine, in Mauritius, that now is the time to say more than: “We want a Cyber City”, “we want a Cyber Island because we can, because we want to be first!” Can you imagine the amount of energy that we would then tap into, and how each person from early childhood upwards would carry with him this vision and actively contribute to this unifying project.

The essence of employability resides in the capacity of generating strong projects for society and organisations – these projects being capable of attracting the necessary investments to change the vision into reality and to mould and form mindsets, brains, behaviours that the future requires. The dream of independence in the same way galvanised our elders and moulded the mindsets that shaped our country.

Many organisations suffer from the absence of a vision, of a project: Why communicate? Do your job! Communicate to gain new expectations namely in remuneration? No! It is better to have an unsound system that we control, than a system which questions our existing procedures and forces us to review them. The deficit in management abilities endangers employability. The managers themselves should be the most employable, the prime employable to develop the employability of their employees.

It is apparent to me that the development of a national vision as well as company projects that are holistic is the essence of employability. The staff employability is directly proportional to the MD, CEO and Government employability. Employability biggest problem is that of lack of vision and direction in the company, and the nation that results in an absence of audacious goals, direction and therefore incapacity to mobilise the human resources, to reposition, to develop, to train proactively. Its not a question of answering or catering for the needs in one or another domain. Needs do not make the future of a country. Needs do not transform themselves into a creator of organisations and jobs. We must shape that which creates needs, and do so powerfully.

In my opinion, all training strategies and development – they are also systems – can only be achieved if the company’s culture integrates them. In order for a management style to bear fruit, it necessarily has to be aligned with a clear direction and key strategic actions. Otherwise, only a
partial success will be achieved and this is insufficient. The key operating systems to pave the road for employability in a company remains competency matrixes or portfolios, in order to ensure the acquisition and development of functional competencies, training of human resources, performance appraisals, strategy recruitment, modern remuneration strategy that follows the new individualisation of salaries.

This will permit a dynamic and evolutive people/job adequation, centred on company strategy. If there is no wish to review systems notably that of remuneration, neither speech nor action undertaken will be considered seriously. Absence of involvement of employees in bringing about changes in theses systems is equivalent to living with a thorn in your foot and will be seen as a threat.

We have reviewed the forces of internal change of companies pushing towards employability. We have also heard what the managers and employees have to say about the subject, and we have now come to the conclusion that employability is not a given situation and is not even taken into consideration by some. We have dug deep into the heart of individual to evoke the influencing factors on his employability. The vision and projects at a national and company level have been seen to be the essence of both employability and the alignment of management systems framing this employability.

Employability: Real Potential or Virtual Reality?

We will measure the impact in the next generation who will give their verdict on the future that we would have created or not. For the future is not lived but is created. And this starts with a Vision. Until then, lets act as responsible citizens and lets give us the best terms of reference possible to create possibilities for the future and seeds for tomorrow’s harvest.

Let us have a common dream. We all know that great destinies begin with such a vision. History offers us many role models, lets build upon their dreams and create our own.