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Application of Employability Skills and Contextual Performance Level of Employees in Government Agencies

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Abstract

The widespread practice of contractualization even in government institutions is a big challenge facing newly-hired employees in seeking a stable position. Researchers have argued that the quality of practice of employability skills could help employees have better job performance, provide them better working condition or status, and consequently meet the higher expectations of employers. The present study employs descriptive research design to explain the extent of application of employability skills and contextual performance. Based on The Conference Board of Canada's Employability Skills 2000+ and Borman and Motowidlo's Taxonomy of Contextual Performance, two sets of survey questionnaires were adopted to gather data from 220 respondents representing employers and employees from 25 government institutions. Data analysis showed that novice employees in public institutions applied their employability skills such as fundamental, personal management and teamwork skills to some extent. Moreover, results revealed that employees had satisfactory contextual performance. Thus, this may suggest that the application of employability skills and contextual behaviors should be enhanced to meet the increasing and complex challenges of their respective government agencies.

Keywords: *Job Performance, Employability Skills, Employability Skills 2000+, Contextual Performance, Government Agencies*

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Introduction

The continuing discussions on employability have brought implications for higher education reforms (Stasz, 1997) and have heightened the recognition and development of generic employability skills (Arocena, Núñez, & Villanueva, 2006; Robinson & Garton, 2007; Wilton, 2008) of graduates of higher education institutions (HEIs) in the global arena. Universities undertake crucial initiatives to re-examine the characteristics and attributes needed by graduates and to strengthen generic skill enhancement (Crebert, Bates, Bell, Patrick, & Cragolini, 2004; Wilton, 2008; Bridgstock, 2009) to make them “appealing to multiple employers across multiple work contexts and disciplines” (Bridgstock, 2009, p. 32).

The employability of graduates is regarded not just as a result of professional, discipline-specific knowledge and skills (Leckey & McGuigan, 1997) but as an ability to show generic skills, attitudes and qualities that are readily transferred to workplace or occupational situations after finishing their undergraduate programs (Harvey, 2000; Crebert et al., 2004; de Guzman & de Castro, 2008). In this case, some researchers have studied the employability skills of graduates (Mayer, 1992; Evers, Rush, J. C., & Berdrow, 1998; Robinson, 2000; Kearns, 2001; Crebert et al., 2004; Arocena, Núñez, & Villanueva, 2006; Ogbeide, 2006; Wilton, 2008; Wickramasinghe & Perera, 2010; Abas-Mastura, Imam, & Osman, 2013).

The employability skills are known as fundamental and general skills which are indispensable for an individual looking for a job (Guile, 2002; Ogbeide, 2006), basic skills necessary for getting, keeping, and doing well on a job (Robinson, 2000), generic competencies or abilities applied “across a wide range of occupations and thus enabling job-to-job mobility” (Arocena et al., 2006, p.193), essential transferable knowledge, skills and attitudes to thrive in the 21st century workplace (Overtoom, 2000), and generic transferable skills preferred and valued by employers in government institutions when looking for entry-level job applicants (Abas-Mastura et al., 2013). Additionally, these are core skills needed and utilized by individuals for work, learning, and life in varied contexts or situations. Clarke (2008) viewed that one way to get or keep a job is to ensure that worker’s attributes or qualities coincide with employer’s demands, prospects and requirements. In this case, only a few number of workers who acquire “highly specialized or rare skills and experience, as well as a high degree of flexibility and mobility, are in a position to influence labor market outcomes” (Clarke, 2008, p. 270). Throughout this article, various labels like ‘generic skills’, ‘core skills’, ‘essential skills’, ‘key competencies’, ‘critical’, ‘non-technical’, ‘transferable skills’, ‘soft skills’, or ‘key skills’ (Mayer, 1992; Hofstrand, 1996; Robinson, 2006) refer to employability skills.

The graduates, who acquired employability skills, become work-ready and geared up to face instability of employment settings and requirements, as well as the fast rising technologies (Butterwick & Benjamin, 2006). However, these graduates are not completely tooled with the employability skills desired by employers (Tetreault, 1997; Evers et al., 1998; Robinson, 2000; Brown, Hesketh & Williams, 2003; Heldrich, 2005) necessary in job success (Brown et al., 2003; Tymon, 2011;). In a way, this gap may hamper their transfer in the work setting. Researchers have explored this prevailing skill gap (Ranasinghe, 1992; Morley, 2001; Lindsay, 2002; Kivinen & Silvennoinen, 2002; Shivpuri & Kim, 2004) which has challenged the HEIs to maintain and sustain its crucial role in producing adaptable graduates in this era of knowledge-driven economy and competitive pressures of employment (Martin, Milne-Home, Barrett, Spalding, & Jones, 2000). In this case, the HEIs have been tagged to be a promoter of employability skills. For instance, an alignment of higher education with employer-valued skills can be done through curriculum change in such a way that graduates’ characteristics, skills and abilities are considered. As practiced in universities in Canada, the USA, Australia, New Zealand, Denmark, Finland and the UK, skills profile has been incorporated through their undergraduate curriculum programs or separate subject areas to develop students’ generic skills (Cranmer, 2006), thereby paving way to smooth shift from a university setting to a workplace (Drummond, Nixon, & Wiltshire, 1998; Humphreys, Greenan, & McIlveen, 1997).

The term employability skills referred to in this article is derived from the Employability Skills 2000+ conceptualized by the Conference Board of Canada (CBC) (2000); thus, this article focuses on different skill areas belonging to the three main categories of employability skills such as Fundamental, Personal Management and Teamwork Skills, that are applied in the public work settings of entry-level employees. It is important to stress that in this article, the government employees rated the extent of practice of employability skills which they had acquired during their stay in their respective HEIs.

Moreover, this article also presents one facet of job performance in an organization which is the contextual performance. It is defined as behaviors that contribute to the culture and climate of the organization (Borman & Motowidlo, 1993; Motowidlo & Schmit, 1999). It “involves behaviors that

support the social, organizational and psychological environment in which task behaviors are performed” (LePine, Hanson, Borman, & Motowidlo, 2001, p. 56). Also, Borman and Motowidlo (1993) outlined the conceptual basis for expanding the criterion domain beyond the task performance to include elements of contextual performance which is described as extra-task proficiency that contributes more to the organizational, social, and psychological environment to help accomplish organizational goals. For Tubre, Arthur and Paul (2000) such notion was consistent with organizational citizenship behavior, pro-social, and organizational spontaneity studied by Organ (1988), Brief and Motowidlo (1986), and George and Brief (1992). All these labels pertained to constructs that contribute to organizational goals and these contextual behaviors help facilitate communications, lubricate social communications, and reduce tension and/or disruptive emotional responses.

According to Van Scotter (2000), employees are engaged in contextual performance when they are involved with voluntarily helping their co-workers by putting extra energy to complete a given task, putting extra time to get task done on time and so forth. Thus, “volunteering for extra work, persisting with enthusiasm, helping and cooperating with others, following rules and procedures, and supporting or defending the organization are all examples of contextual performance behaviors” (Motowidlo & Schmit, 1999 as cited by Befort & Hatrup, 2003, p. 17).

Through an extensive review of literature on employability skills, very limited studies have been conducted to investigate the use of employability skills in worksettings as well as the level of contextual performance in government agencies. The present article, therefore, highlights an unexplored topic on the extent of application of employability skills acquired by employees during their undergraduate years. This also dealt with employees’ level of contextual performance in government agencies as perceived by them and their employers. The enhancement of skills on a much more sustainable way through their workplace application of employability skills may be done and this may influence their contextual performance. This study then is foreseen to have a substantial contribution to the extant literature.

Method

Descriptive design was utilized in the study to describe the extent of practice of employability skills of government employees and their level of contextual performance in work settings.

The study was carried out in 25 regional government agencies in two chartered cities where these agencies were located. These agencies were purposively selected on the basis of having employees who served for one to three years to qualify as employee-respondents. “Clear criteria provide a basis for describing and defending purposive samples” (Gay, Mills & Airasian, 2009 p. 135). For each government agency, two groups of respondents were identified. The employers consisted one group and their respective employees composed the other group. The employers were selected using purposive sampling. Only the section or unit chiefs with employees under their direct supervision were taken as respondents. The employees who directly report to the sampled section or unit chiefs were chosen through random sampling. Hence, each group comprised of 110 respondents, totalling to a sample size of 220.

In this study, two sets of survey questionnaires were utilized as research instruments: one set for employers and another set for employees. Job Performance Questionnaire (JPQ) was administered to the employers to obtain data on elements of employees’ contextual performance. Such elements were rated through a three-point scale ranging from (1) “needs improvement” to (3) “very satisfactory”.

The employees’ questionnaire covered Part I which dealt with Employability Skills Questionnaire (ESQ). ESQ is a 50-item list of employability skills adopted from Employability Skills 2000+ conceptualized by members of the Conference Board of Canada (The Conference Board of Canada, 2000). It was then modified in order to fit in the study context. Thus, the list of employability skills was reduced to 50 skill items out of 56 found in the original document. The said skills were categorized into three, with skill areas for each category. These were Fundamental Skills (communicate, manage information, use numbers, and think and solve problems), Personal Management Skills (demonstrate positive attitudes and behaviors, be responsible, be adaptable, learn continuously, and work safely) and Teamwork Skills (work with others and participate in projects and tasks). Then, under each skill area were indicators that were self-rated by employees. ESQ was used to measure the extent of practice skills of employees in their jobs. The employees’ responses ranged from (1) “not at all” to (3) “to a greater extent.”

Part II of the employees’ questionnaire was the Job Performance Questionnaire (JPQ), which measured the level of employees’ contextual performance. This JPQ used a three-point scale that ranged from (1) “needs improvement” to (3) “very satisfactory”. JPQ was based on Borman and Motowidlo’s

(1997) Taxonomy of Contextual Performance consisting of five elements namely Volunteering, Persisting, Helping/Cooperating, Endorsing, Supporting and Defending Organizational Objectives and Following Organizational Rules. From these contextual elements, 20 indicators were formulated and rated by both groups of respondents to measure the level of employees' contextual performance. The scale values employed in the two sets of survey questionnaires were given the corresponding weights of 1.00-1.49 for 1; 1.50-2.49 for 2, and 2.50-3.00 for 3.

To measure the validity and reliability of the survey questionnaires, the researcher conducted a pilot study for the research instruments. Content validity in terms of adequacy of items, relevance and format was obtained through an evaluation of five experts from local higher educational institutions. These validators suggested to explicitly write the labels of the three categories of employability skills (e.g. Fundamental Skills), together with their corresponding skill areas (e.g. Communication), in the ESQ instead of just enumerating the indicators of all skill areas from one (1) to 50. Thus, the 50-item ESQ for skill practice was then clearly divided into three main categories of employability skills: (a) Fundamental Skills, (b) Personal Management Skills, and (c) Teamwork Skills. Each category indicated also its two or more skill areas (e.g. communication, responsibility, working with others, etc). In doing this, the employee- respondents could easily identify and understand the employability skills they are to rate.

The test-retest method was adopted to assess the reliability of the survey questionnaires. The questionnaires were administered twice within a three-week timeframe to two groups (employers and employees) of non-participating respondents. For each group, there were five respondents coming from Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (ARMM) regional line agencies. The result showed a reliability coefficient of .88 for employers' questionnaire and .71 for employees' questionnaire indicating that the questionnaires are reliable and comparable to standardized measures for non-ability test (Helmstadler, 1964). For statistical analysis of data, means was used to get the norm score to describe the application of employability skills as well as the contextual performance as perceived by both employers and employees.

Results and Discussion

Application of Employability Skills of Employees

Table 1 contains data on the level of application of employability skills of employees working in different public institutions in one region in the Philippines. These skills which are acquired during their college or university education are self- assessed by employees as to how they are applied in their respective workplaces. Periodic self-evaluation of strengths and weaknesses is one measure to keep one's employability (Hall, 1996; Seibert, 1996).

Table 1. Employability Skills Applied by Employees (N=220)

Employability Skills (Categories/Areas)	Mean	Description
Fundamental Skills		
Communication	2.32	To Some Extent
Management of Information	2.34	To Some Extent
Use of Numbers	2.28	To Some Extent
Thinking and Problem Solving	2.24	To Some Extent
*Overall	2.27	To Some Extent
Personal Management Skills		
Positive Attitudes and Behaviors	2.57	To a Greater Extent
Responsibility	2.42	To Some Extent
Adaptability	2.49	To Some Extent
Learning Continuously	2.54	To a Greater Extent
Working Safely	2.47	To Some Extent
*Overall	2.50	To a Greater Extent
Teamwork Skills		
Working with Others	2.46	To Some Extent
Participation in Projects and Tasks	2.23	To Some Extent
*Overall	2.38	To Some Extent

Note. 1.00-1.49 (To a Little Extent); 1.50-2.49 (To Some Extent); 2.50-3.00 (To a Greater Extent)

As shown in Table 1, the Fundamental Skills made up of skill areas such as Communication (2.32), Management of Information (2.24), Use of Numbers (2.28) and Thinking and Problem Solving (2.24) were applied “to some extent”. Based on the mean scores of four skill areas, the Fundamental Skills category gained an overall mean of 2.27. This basically describes that employees’ application of employability skills in their current jobs was to some extent only.

The extent of using the Fundamental Skills particularly on Management of Information and Thinking and Problem Solving skill areas is not so consistent with Bailey’s (1997) findings that office employees do increasingly more sophisticated operations like operating computers and analyzing data. In the study of Lankard (1990), findings show that employees applied problem solving, decision making and teamwork skills since routinized, repetitive tasks had been highly discouraged.

For Personal Management Skills category, the application of both skill areas namely Positive Attitudes and Behaviors (2.57) and Learning Continuously (2.54) was given a rating of “to a greater extent” by the employees. Despite the rating of “to some extent only” with respect to the practice of the remaining skill areas like Responsibility (2.42), Adaptability (2.49), and Working Safely (2.47), the Personal Management Skills in general were greatly applied in government agencies as indicated by its 2.50 overall mean. For Clarke (2008), workers need to be prepared for greater job opportunities in the future by enhancing their attitudes and behaviors like having flexibility and adaptability and ensuring that their skills suit their work assignments.

The skill areas, Working with Others (2.46) and Participation in Projects and Tasks (2.23), under the Teamwork Skills category obtained an overall mean of 2.38 which shows that Teamwork Skills were applied “to some extent” by employees in their current job.

In general, the data findings presented in Table 1 indicate that the three categories of employability skills such as Fundamental Skills (2.27), Personal Management Skills (2.50), and Teamwork Skills (2.38) were moderately practiced or applied by the employees in their respective workplaces. Findings imply that the employability skills that were developed in them during their college or university studies may not be the generic skills greatly needed, applied and prioritized in their present jobs. These also suggest that probably the employees were not able to enhance and sustain the use of employability skills while performing their jobs in their work stations. It may appear that only little attention or limited opportunities to develop workers’ generic skills for future job are provided by several employers (Carbery & Garavan, 2005) particularly for contractual workers since a return on their investment over the duration of the contract is not highly expected (Connell & Burgess, 2006).

Carbery and Garavan (2005) also emphasized that employers showed greater interest on capability trainings that will redound to improvement of task performance of employees which give immediate results. Similarly, Baruch (2001) regarded that employers seemed apprehensive that skills enhancement of their employees tends to create a scenario where these employees may look for bigger job compensation and brighter prospects in other workplaces.

Moreover, the findings of the present study may be attributed to changing job skill requirements caused by varying needs, conditions and demands of workplaces in this era of technological advancements. Also, Clarke (2008) noted that employees have to anticipate and prepare for future changes and take appropriate decisions and actions; thus, it is not just sufficient to respond to changes in workplaces. Arocena et al. (2006) pointed out that workers should have flexibility and skills required by employers.

Contextual Performance of Employees

The results on the perceptions of employees and their employers who are their direct heads of offices on the Contextual Performance are presented in Table 2. This Contextual Performance is a job performance dimension that refers to extra-task proficiency contributory to the progress of a larger context of the employees’ respective workplaces.

Table 2 data present the employers’ and employees’ satisfactory rating on the employees’ level of Contextual Performance relative to all five elements such as Volunteering (2.28; 2.39), Persisting (2.30; 2.40), Helping/Cooperating (2.30; 2.44), Endorsing, Supporting and Defending Organizational Objectives (2.28; 2.43), and Following Organizational Rules (2.31; 2.42). As seen in Table 2, the mean values of employees were higher compared to those mean values of employers. As a whole, both employers and employees obtained the overall mean scores of 2.30 and 2.42, respectively. This seems to be quite surprising because it is uncommon to find employers and employees giving similar rating for each of the elements of contextual behaviors in their workplaces.

The satisfactory rating result, however, may imply that most probably both groups are not fully aware and mindful that other than the specific tasks of employees, they may also perform contextual behaviors which are not job specific functions. In addition, this may suggest that employees and

employers alike are not so focused on developing this contextual dimension of job performance. In this situation, the result may imply further that contextual behaviors are not highly performed by employees. Hence, this may mean that both groups of respondents give more importance on task performance to achieve more outputs in their agencies. According to Conway (1999), in conducting an appraisal, supervisors tend to consider more the employees' task performance than their contextual performance.

Table 2. Level of Contextual Performance of Employees (N=220)

Job Performance Dimension/Elements	Employers' Perception		Employees' Perception	
	Mean	Description	Mean	Description
<u>Contextual Performance</u>				
Volunteering	2.38	Satisfactory	2.39	Satisfactory
Persisting	2.30	Satisfactory	2.40	Satisfactory
Helping/Cooperating	2.30	Satisfactory	2.44	Satisfactory
Endorsing, Supporting, Defending Organizational Objectives	2.28	Satisfactory	2.43	Satisfactory
Following Organizational Rules	2.31	Satisfactory	2.41	Satisfactory
Overall	2.30	Satisfactory	2.42	Satisfactory

Note: Range of Means and Description: 1.00-1.49 (NI - Needs Improvement), 1.50-2.49 (S - Satisfactory), 2.50-3.00 (VS - Very Satisfactory)

Conclusion

The overall moderate practice of employability skills by entry-level employees is indicative of limited opportunities provided to them by their respective employers in utilizing the acquired skills in their present workplaces. Some public employers are not so concerned on the development of transferable and generic employability skills of their own employees because they give more weight in improving their job-specific functions. If some employers in government line agencies remain unresponsive to generic skills enhancement, employees are not apprehensive so much. Public employees have security of tenure and they strongly perceive that they cannot be easily fired from work even if they fail to maximize the application of their skills in their job. However, employees in private institutions are mostly in contractual basis so they need to perform their functions beyond what is required in order to stay in their job. Moreover, this moderate level of skill practice reveals that some acquired skills of employees through the HEIs are not the ones critically required by their employers. In some cases, government employers accept entry-level applicants even though they lack the skills needed for the job. This may not be the case in private institutions where matching of job skill requirements and employees' qualifications is highly ensured. However, both public and private employers consider recruiting and hiring employees who possess the employability skills desired and valued by them.

The findings on the satisfactory level of contextual performance of employees signifies that they are more confined to their specific tasks than spending more efforts in establishing better social and psychological climate as well as advancing organizational goals. Public employers and their employees do not fully consider contextual activities as important dimension of job performance. This situation may be attributed to lack of awareness and understanding of contextual behaviors as well as lack of regular conduct of performance audit in government offices. It is also possible that job performance evaluation only focuses on employees' specific core technical functions and not on their extra-task activities that contribute to broader environment of their workplaces. In this aspect, public and private employers may not vary on the importance placed to job-specific functions since they tend to prioritize performance of prescribed tasks to produce more outputs and accomplish their targets efficiently and effectively.

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