

## INTERNAL AND EXTERNAL EMPLOYABILITY OF EMPLOYEES: A STUDY AMONG EMPLOYEES IN KLANG VALLEY, MALAYSIA

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### **ABSTRACT**

The paper aimed at examining factors that influence employees' employability. Factors that were examined are training supports, interpersonal relationship, amount of training given, the level of job experiences, education level and tenure with current job. Employability is measured using two dimensions; internal and external employability. Pearson correlation tests indicated that training support was positively related to external employability ( $r = 0.193$ ,  $p = .001$ ) and internal employability ( $r = 0.182$ ,  $p = .002$ ). Interpersonal relationship was found only significantly related to external employability ( $r = 0.125$ ,  $p = .022$ ). The relationship with internal employability was insignificant ( $r = 0.100$ ,  $p = .054$ ). Amount of training received by employees were both related to internal ( $r = .251$ ,  $p = .000$ ) and external employability ( $r = .167$ ,  $p = .003$ ). On the other hand, job experiences was only significantly related to internal employability ( $r = .219$ ,  $p = .000$ ). Education level and tenure were found only giving significant influence to external employability.

**Keywords:** training, job experiences, interpersonal relationship, internal employability, external employability

## **INTRODUCTION**

Today, employers are looking for more than just technical skills from the modern workforce. They are looking for people who are capable of performing various tasks and roles. Employers have been very serious in recruiting competent employees with vast experience so that they can cut short on training. Employees, on the other hand, are searching for opportunities for self development that can expand their horizons. They receive trainings formally or informally on the job. Some are given the support from their superiors in the form of job enlargement, job enrichment and job rotation. All these processes are expected to expand the skills and job experience of the employees. Beside these programs, interpersonal relationships are also used to expose employees to new roles and perspective. Mentors who are highly experienced and skilled are assigned to guide and provide advice to employees with less experience.

The idea to provide training and development (T&D) supports to employees is mainly to allow them to be more employable for other tasks. Regardless of positions or where they work, having exposed to various tasks and roles may increase the ability of employees to assume other roles which are initially not meant for them. It seems that employees benefit from T&D in many ways and more importantly, such support is very useful for their successive marketability. Being able to perform different roles and be employed in different organizations nowadays may be one of the best selling points for an employee. And to be one, the person should be equipped with the right knowledge, skills and abilities through job experiences and other T&D programs. Marketability also means a person is able to remain in his or her job that eventually could help him or her climb the career ladder.

The objective of this paper was mainly to measure factors that influence employability. More specifically, this paper examined employability in two different dimensions; internal and external employability. Six variables were examined their respective relationships with both types of employability.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Training and Development Support**

T&D supports for employees could come in various forms. It may include formal strategies like career planning, training and assessment centers and informal support such as providing mentoring, coaching and networking opportunities (Sturges et al., 2002). Ng et al. (2005) regard any program, process and assistance provided by organizations to support and enhance their employees' career success as organizational sponsorship.

There are other ways that are equally effective such as job enrichment, job rotation and job enlargement that allow employees to be exposed to new experience, yet less costly. But it can only happen with full support from superiors who are willing to assign employees with new functions and responsibilities. Managers and superiors should also be opened for errors and mistakes that employees commit. Such support is highly needed so that employees can expand

their skills and thus, employability. It is noted by Wang and Chan (2006) that strong support from managers and superiors has great potential in contributing to the multiplier effect of training.

Most organizations and employers are supportive when it comes to providing T&D opportunities for employees. Both parties will benefit albeit some employers would claim that investing too much would somehow backfire. Generally, employees would be happier and more committed if they receive support from leaders or mentors who help them to develop their career. This is one of employers' responsibilities in providing opportunities for employees for their career development and better job performance. Employers, on the other hand, would benefit in terms of higher employee retention, better ability in improving quality and coping with changes (Noe, 2008). However, despite the advantages of being supportive in providing T&D opportunities for employees, some research posited that high commitment in T&D does not necessarily guarantee high returns on investment (Blundell, Dearden, Meghir and Sianesi, 1999). It is noted by Carbery and Garavan (2005) that employers are more willing to give job specific training that is relevant to employees' current job in the company and not so much training that offer generic skill development. This is because such training on job specific skill gives more immediate return as compared to the latter's that could only be realized in the long term.

### **Internal and External Employability**

According to Tome (2007), in the last decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, with the advent of Knowledge Based Economy, and of globalization, the economic structure of countries began to change very fast and employability began to be much more uncertain. Organizations have to be prepared with more competition and need to strengthen their competitiveness. Human capital is one of the major weapons that serve as the driver for them to survive and thrive. Each and every employee hired is considered an asset that can be used to produce more wealth. On the other hand, employees have to stay marketable given the uncertain economic condition. They have to find employers and workplaces that offer both employment and career development. It seems that both employers and employees have to compete in their own respective worlds.

Clarke (2007) noted that measures of employability tended to focus on tangible and quantifiable criteria, for example having appropriate qualifications, having a particular job title, identification with an organization, particularly when the organization had reputation for hiring or training good people, or years of experience in a company or in a specific field. Indeed, education and training play a significant role to employability.

As mentioned by Groot and Maassen van den Brink (2000), education and training are expected to make workers more employable within the firm and greater employability increases internal flexibility. They also indicated that employees with longer years of tenure in the organizations tend to be less employable within the firm. This is due to 'experience concentration' that makes the employees less capable of performing new tasks which require new skills and knowledge. Undoubtedly, those who are highly experienced in their job tasks are very skillful and productive at the present job but unfortunately it makes them less 'marketable' for other jobs.

In his survey that was based on data collected from 1988 to 2000, Tome (2007) reported that employees with high levels of education and high tenure seem to lead to higher

employability but surprisingly, those with low education level with lower tenure also have higher employability. However, he strongly noted that this happened when there was a dual labor market that occurred due to different economic conditions within the period. His study somehow failed to clearly indicate the robustness of education as the determinant of employability. Therefore, it is pertinent to examine whether the same scenario is found in other studies.

Employability has primarily benefited employees with high developed or high demanded skills (Clarke and Patrickson, 2008). Groot and Maassen van de Brink (2000) distinguish between workers' internal and external employability. *External employability* refers to the ability and willingness to switch to a similar or another job in another firm, and therefore reflects the value of workers' human capital in the external labor market. *Internal employability* refers to a worker's ability and willingness to remain employed with the current employer, which is the value of a worker's human capital in the internal labor market. Trained employees can be employed into more jobs within the firm with less supervision.

The idea of employability is a high concern nowadays with the uncertain economic condition that exposes both employers and employees to ambiguities. Employees who are less skilled and competent are susceptible to retrenchment. Employers have to juggle between the need to contain cost and maintain productivity for efficiency. Having only the right people with the right skills at the right time is the priority. Thus, employees should have the marketable skills that promise them immortal career life.

### **T&D and Employability**

Mincer (1991) posited that employers that have long years of education are able to find suitable jobs easily. This is supported by Tome (2007) who conducted a study on employees in Portugal. Nevertheless, he also found that employees with low educations tend to have higher employability and he added that this happened due to the existence of 'dual labor market' in Portugal. However, in their study, Groot and Maassen van den Brink (2000) did not find any significant relationship between years of education and employability. Rather, it is the on-the-job training that is significantly influencing the employees' ability to be employed elsewhere. This is supported by another study done by Bassanini (2006) which found that employee training programs have helped to raise the overall employability of workers, significantly improving their chances of gaining reemployment after having been laid off.

Groot and Maassen van Den Brinks (2000) found that formal work related training – such as apprenticeship training and the number of on-the-job training courses taken increase the probability that one is employed in other jobs or department at the firm. There is also the fear that once trained, the employee might become more employable and may seek to advance their careers elsewhere (Wang and Chan, 2006). This view is similar to the other research mentioned that training courses taken has significant effect on the extent to which workers can be employed elsewhere (Groot and Maassen van den Brink, 2000). More training support also appears to have stronger impact on employment security (Wang and Chan, 2006). Other than that, there is a correlation between employee training and job satisfaction leading to employee retention. When employees are properly trained, they become empowered with the knowledge and skills to perform their job functions with confidence. In turn, they develop a stronger sense of accomplishment, usefulness and loyalty to the organization (Peterson, 1999).

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

The present study aimed to assess six variables that could influence employability. As expounded earlier, prior studies have indicated that employability could be influenced by various factors like training support, interpersonal relationship, amount of training, job experience, education level and tenure with the current job. However, previous studies only examined employability in general without looking into its specific dimensions. As posited by Groot and Maasen van den Brink (2000), employability has two dimensions; internal and external employability. The present study sought to examine how the six variables were related to the two dimensions of employability.

## **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

### **Research Instruments**

The data was collected by distributing survey questionnaires among the employees in various organizations from diverse industries. The questionnaire was divided into three sections; Section A asked on training support, interpersonal relationship, internal and external employability. Section B and C asked on the amount of training and job experience of employees in the past two years. Respondents' demographic profiles were asked in Section D.

Measurement items for training support and interpersonal relationships were adopted from Sturges et al. (2000) that consisted of 10 items. The items were measured on a 5-point scale, which ranged from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree).

Internal and external employability were measured using self-developed items which are adapted from studies done by Groot and Maasen van den Brink (2000) and Sanders and de Grip (2004). Nine items were developed and responses were on a 5-point scale ranged from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree).

The amount of T&D programs received by the respondents was measured by asking the employees to rate on a scale of 1 (never) to 5 (very often). They were asked to rate on the amount of T&D programs they received in the last 2 years. There are two parts; training and job experience. The respondents were asked to indicate the amount of training they received such as self learning, guidance from senior staff, mentoring, on-the-job training, short courses (1 – 14 days) and long courses (more than 14 days). Job experience was measured by asking the respondents to indicate how much they get to be assigned to different tasks, special projects, switching roles with colleagues, researching new ways and taking temporary roles in another firm. The total score for each respondent was obtained by summing up the items in the respective variable.

The questionnaires were self administered by the researchers and each respondent was personally approached and to encourage participation, tokens were given as appreciations. A total of 260 responses were obtained and they were used for further analysis.

## **DATA ANALYSIS**

### **Demographic Analysis**

A total of 260 responses were gathered. Majority respondents were between the age of 21 to 30 years old and female employees. Almost sixty-three percent of the respondents

possessed bachelor's degree or higher qualifications. The samples were dominated by those working in service sector and holding administrative positions. Table 1 summarizes the respondents' demographic description.

**Table 1:** Respondents' Demographic Characteristics (N=260)

Demographic Variables	Classifications	Frequency	Percent
<b>Age</b>	20 years and below	2	1
	21 to 30 years	148	56
	31 to 40years	88	34
	41 to 50 years	20	8
	Above 51 years	2	1
<b>Gender</b>	Male	95	37
	Female	162	63
<b>Highest Qualification</b>	High School or less	45	17
	Colleges/Polytechnics	63	24
	Bachelor's degree or higher	152	59
<b>Industry</b>	Mining, quarry	10	4
	Construction	18	7
	Manufacturing	12	4
	Transportation, communication and public utilities	26	10
	Agriculture, fisheries, forestry	2	1
	Trade	5	2
	Services	186	72
<b>Occupation</b>	Managerial	43	16
	Professional	87	34
	Administrative support	107	41
	Production, maintenance, construction, operating, material handling	23	9

### Reliability of Measurement Items

Four variables (training support, interpersonal relationship, internal employability and external employability) were measured using nineteen items. A factor analysis was run to summarize the structure. Based on the factor analysis output, 4 factors were produced consisting of items for the respective variables. The Bartlett test of sphericity is significant and the KMO measure of sampling adequacy is .855. The factor analysis on the construct has produced four dimensions which contained clear cut items. The first column is labeled as "training support", second column as "internal employability", third column as "external employability" and the last column was labeled as "interpersonal relationship". The output of the factor analysis is as indicated in Table 2.

**Table 2: Rotated Component Matrix**

	Component			
	1	2	3	4
My boss makes sure I get the training needed for my career	.825			
I was given sufficient training to develop my career	.813			
I have been taught things I need to know to get on I this organization	.778			
I have been given work that has developed my skills for the future	.661			
I have been given a personal development plan	.640			
My boss has given me clear feedback on my performance	.518			
I am employable for tasks that actually belong to another job within the firm		.791		
I am capable of performing another job within the department or firm		.762		
I am capable of performing different tasks even though they are not actually mine		.754		
Given the skills and knowledge I have, I can be assigned to a different task within the department or firm		.739		
My boss has introduced me to people who help my career			.828	
I have been given a mentor to help my career development			.764	
I have been introduced to people at work who are prepared to help me develop my career			.722	
I have been given impartial career advice when I needed it			.611	
I am willing to work in another firm as long as I have to perform similar job				.770
Given the skills and knowledge I have, I am employable in another firm				.762
My work experience gives me opportunity to be employable in another firm				.741
I am able to switch to a similar job in another firm				.659
I have no problem doing a different job in another firm				.420
<b>Cronbach's Coefficient Alpha</b>	<b>0.871</b>	<b>0.802</b>	<b>0.836</b>	<b>0.772</b>

Total variance explained: 62.902

Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis.

Rotation Method: Varimax with Kaiser Normalization.

### Amount of Training, Job Experience and Employability

Table 3 indicated that training support was significantly related to internal employability ( $r = .167$ ,  $p = .003$ ) and external employability ( $r = .251$ ,  $p = .000$ ). Job experience was found only significant to internal employability ( $r = .219$ ,  $p = .000$ ) and it is not significantly related to external employability ( $r = .098$ ,  $p = .058$ ).

**Table 3:** Correlations between Amount of Training, Job Experience and Employability

		External Employability	Internal Employability
Amount of Training	Pearson Correlation	.251**	.167**
	Sig. (1-tailed)	.000	.003
	N	260	260
Job Experience	Pearson Correlation	.098	.219**
	Sig. (1-tailed)	.058	.000
	N	259	259

*\*All are tested at  $\alpha=0.05$*

### Education and Employability

ANOVA test was used to determine whether employability is influenced by education level. The results indicated that there existed significant differences across different education level in terms of external employability,  $F(2,256) = 3.065$ ,  $p = .048$ . Given the significant difference, a post hoc multiple comparisons test was run to examine which level of education that significantly influenced external employability. Tukey HSD test indicated that bachelor's degree holder or higher had significantly higher mean external employability than those with college or polytechnic degree (mean difference =  $.211$ ,  $p = .04$ ). The ANOVA test did not show any significant differences of internal employability across different education levels,  $F(2,256) = .485$ ,  $p = .616$ .

### Tenure and Employability

ANOVA test was used to determine whether employability is influenced by tenure. The results indicated that there exist significant differences across tenure level in terms of external employability,  $F(3,256) = 4.757$ ,  $p = .003$ . Using a Tukey HSD test, it was found that those with tenure less than 2 years had significantly higher external employability mean than those with 3 to 5 years tenure (mean difference =  $.246$ ,  $p = .016$ ). It was also found that those with more than 10 years of tenure had significantly higher external employability mean than those with 3 to 5 years of tenure (mean difference =  $.427$ ,  $p = .033$ ). The ANOVA test did not show any significant differences of internal employability across different tenure levels,  $F(3,256) = .984$ ,  $p = .401$ .



### Training Support, Interpersonal Relationships and Employability

Pearson correlation tests were used to test the individual relationships among the variables. The output indicated that training support was positively related to external employability ( $r = 0.193$ ,  $p = .001$ ) and internal employability ( $r = 0.182$ ,  $p = .002$ ). However, interpersonal relationship was found only significantly related to external employability ( $r = 0.125$ ,  $p = .022$ ). The relationship with internal employability was insignificant ( $r = 0.100$ ,  $p = .054$ ). Table 4 below summarizes the findings of the analysis.

**Table 4:** Correlations between Training Support, Interpersonal Relationship and Employability

		External employability	Internal employability
Training Support	Pearson Correlation	<b>.193**</b>	<b>.182**</b>
	Sig. (1-tailed)	.001	.002
	N	259	259
Interpersonal relationship	Pearson Correlation	<b>.125*</b>	.100
	Sig. (1-tailed)	.022	.054
	N	260	260

\*All are tested at  $\alpha=0.05$

### DISCUSSIONS

The study findings generally supported the notion that support that are given to employees in expanding their skills and knowledge are very helpful in increasing the level of employability. This is in line with the previous findings that showed similar patterns of relationships (e.g. Groot & Maasen van den Brink, 2000; Sanders & de Grip, 2004). However, the insignificant relationship between interpersonal relationship and internal employability is rather unexpected. Such finding could be due to the fact that efforts made to increase networking or interpersonal relationship does not really help in expanding employees' ability in performing different tasks within the organizations. The study findings further provide more insights that in order to increase employees' internal and external employability, more formal T&D efforts have to be capitalized like training participation, superiors' support in career planning, assignment of challenging tasks and opportunity for performing various tasks as well as feedback on work performance.

The significant relationship between interpersonal relationship and external employability gives a clue that interpersonal relationship is more useful in expanding one's opportunities for employment in other organizations. Indeed, to be employable outside, an employee requires a fresh outlook and perspective. Having the chance to relate or work with people from various background helps to make the person able to learn something new which is beyond his or her boundary. It may be able to shift the person's paradigm. The insignificant association between interpersonal relationship and internal employability perhaps due to the fact that the new things or knowledge acquired are only relevant for new experience outside the organization and has no direct connection with the experience gained from the current organization. Furthermore, the items used to measure the interpersonal relationship variable is more on the employees' future career and not so much relevant to their current job.

Significant relationship between the amount of training received by employees and both internal and external employability is consistent with others' findings (Groot & Maasen van den Brink, 2000; Sanders & de Grip, 2004; Bassanini, 2006; Heckman et al., 1999; Wang and Chan, 2006). More training opportunities offered to employees are able to enhance their employability within and outside the current organizations. On the other hand, job experience was found only significantly related to internal employability and not to external employability. This could be due to the fact that most development programs given to employees are job specific that is only relevant to the employees' current job in the organizations. Perhaps, what is mentioned by Baruch (2001) and Carbery and Garavan (2005) on employers' reluctance to provide generic skills for employees is valid.

The study indicated that those with bachelor's degree had higher external employability than those with lower qualifications. This is generally consistent with others' findings (Mincer, 1991; Brown, 1989; Frazis et al. 1998). However, there was no significant relationship between education levels with internal employability. Similarly, those with more than 10 years of tenure have higher external employability but there is no evidence to support that longer tenure leads to higher internal employability. It was noted by Groot and Maasen van den Brink (2000) in their studies that education, tenure and work experience did not significantly explain internal employability. This could be due to the fact that higher qualification and experience only helped to increase external employability but possibly, to be internally marketable, what is more important is their level of current job performance.

Another interesting finding to note is those with less than 2 years tenure are more externally employable than their counterparts with 3 to 5 years of tenure. This finding gave a clue that those with longer years of experience at the current job are expert at their present job but have less ability to perform other or similar tasks in other organizations. On the other hand, those with less tenure are more employable outside because they are relatively easier to be trained for other jobs in other organizations.

### **IMPLICATIONS OF THE STUDY**

The study findings have several implications to employers especially in the perspective of T&D. Given the strong and significant relationships between amount of training and employability, employers are supposed to provide more opportunities for employees to go for T&D programs. And the T&D programs should not be restricted to job specific skills and knowledge; rather they should also address the generic skills. As noted by Wang and Chan (2006) and Noe (2008), when employees receive more chances to upgrade their skills and knowledge, both employees and employers will benefit in terms of productivity, employee commitment, loyalty and efficiency. It is a win-win situation when both parties will gain.

### **MAJOR LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY**

The present study findings used a small number of samples (n = 260) and the data was collected in Klang Valley area only. Given the various types of industry in the area, the findings cannot be generalized to the whole population. Therefore, in the future, more samples need to be used that can represent the total workforce population. The items used to measure internal and external employability were adjusted from a study done by Groot and Maasen van den Brink (2000). The present study used more items to measure both variables and new items

were self developed. Therefore, more samples need to be taken to ensure the validity of the items. Measurement items for T&D should also be revised in order to better reflect the amount of T&D received by employees.

## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The study revealed that generally, T&D program provided for employees are useful for their employability. Active participation and strong support from managers and superiors help to increase employees' skills and knowledge. The present study also sought to measure to what extent that these T&D supports are linked to internal and external employability. Using the original measurement items developed by Groot & Maassen van den Brink (2000), the authors modified them by increasing the number of items and subsequently used factor analysis to cluster the items into their respective dimensions.

For future research, more surveys need to be done in order to increase the validity of the items used in measuring the internal and external employability and the level of T&D supports. The insignificant association between interpersonal relationship and internal employability would require more research to be conducted in order to understand the reasons behind it. Possibly, the scope of the research could be expanded to employees in other states in Malaysia.

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