WORKERS AND POSTGRADUATE STUDENT PERCEPTIONS OF EMPLOYABILITY

P. González-Navarro, R. Zurriaga-Llorens, L.I. Llinares-Insa
University of Valencia (SPAIN)

Abstract

The current labor market has modified the labor profile of workers demanded by companies. At present, employees with the capacity to acquire solid, technical, scientific knowledge and open to new knowledge in a constant manner are required, as well as being predisposed to geographical mobility. Numerous studies have focused only on the educational analysis as an indicator of the qualifications needed to access a job. However, individuals, even if they have the same level of formal education, have distinctive characteristics that may favor or harm their access to the labor market. One of these characteristics is employability, understood as the "ability to obtain or keep a job" [1]. Therefore, employability is a condition of preparation to face immediate or future demands in the labour market.

The objective of this paper is to study the perception of employability of a sample of workers and a sample of postgraduate students. It is interesting to know the perceived employability of workers and to contrast it with that of the students who are at the exit door to the job. This contrast could allow the development of plans to improve employability in people who do not yet have a job.

The sample of this study was composed of a total of 132 subjects, residents of the Valencian Community (Spain), and of Spanish nationality. Of these, 45.83% are men and 54.17% women, with an average age of 38 years (SD. = 12.04). 50% are workers already introduced in the labor market and the other 50% are postgraduate students ready to enter in the labor market.

Employability was measured through the Employability Appraisal Scale (EAS) of Llinares-Insa, González-Navarro, Cordoba-Iñesta, and Zacarés-González [2]. This questionnaire measures perceived employability and includes 5 dimensions: employment protective behavior, employment risk, job-seeking behavior, self-control and self-learning. We hypothesize that there will be differences in the perception of employability between active workers and postgraduate students. We expect that workers will have a higher perception of employability than students (Hypothesis 1). We also hypothesized that there will be differences in the perception of employability depending on the gender of the people. In such a way that men will have greater perception of employability than women (Hypothesis 2). To test these hypotheses, Student's t-tests were performed.

Our results have shown that workers have a greater perception of employability than students in the dimension self-control and self-learning. There are also significant differences in the perception of employability depending on gender in self-control dimension.

These results suggest that the ability of the person to manage their behavior (self-control) and the ability to adapt to change and continuous improvement (self-learning), are the factors that facilitate employability. These aspects are found to a greater extent in people who have active work than among postgraduate students. Likewise, self-control and the perception of control of employment are the dimensions that generate greater perception of employability in the sample of men, so it would be convenient to develop these aspects in students and women to favor their perception of employability.

Keywords: employability, gender, postgraduate students, workers, globalization, labour market.

1 INTRODUCTION

In the current labor market individuals have to manage several challenges demanded by companies (see [3]). These challenges involve developing both job-specific and generic competencies, next to a continuous learning to assure the enough flexibility to adapt to changes [4]. In this context, there is agreement among both policy makers and researchers that employability, as "ability to obtain or keep a job" [1], is a condition of preparation to face immediate or future demands in the labor market [5]. In fact, the concept of employability contains several basic skills essential to be effective in the workplace, such as the ability to communicate and relate, the ability to solve problems, the use of organizational processes and teamwork [6].
Many employability researches have focused on personal variable because individuals have some control on them [3]. In this study, we focus on two characteristics of individuals’ employability: to be a worker or postgraduate student and gender.

Workers have personal competences (i.e. problem-solving, interactional skill, efficiency, etc.) to define them as professional and employable to keep or obtain a new employment. Also, they have competences related with career development within and across companies, which allow to acquire a new labor market position [3].

Post-graduate students are in transition from university to the workplace, but the current context make difficult this process. Many of them feel confused about their career objectives, career development and so on, which it is known as “job search clarity” [7]. As a whole, it can affect post-graduate’ employability. Specifically, if as Guo, Chen, and Wang [8] suggest, job search clarity is related with cognitions, behaviors, and potential obstacles or changes of career development.

Research on gender differences has shown the complex reality of women’ employability. These studies indicate that there are still stereotyped professional (and academic) choices and invisible mechanisms of discrimination in the working world [2]. These mechanisms affect the development of women’s professional careers and their employability. In this sense, Kanfer, Wanberg, and Kantrowitz’’s [9] meta-analysis showed that gender has influence on job behavior and that men were more likely to engage in job seeking than women. On the other hand, Llinares-Insa et al. [2] found gender differences in the job search behavior but no gender differences in motivational attributes. However, other studies have shown that women and men do not differ in job search behavior (e.g., [10]).

Taking these arguments into account, the objective of this research is to study the perception of employability of a sample of workers and a sample of postgraduate students. It is interesting to know the perceived employability of workers and to contrast it with that of the students who are at the exit door to the job. Also, we want to know if there are differences between man and women in employability. Knowing those aspects could allow the development of plans to improve employability in people.

We hypothesize the following:

Hypothesis 1: Workers and post-graduates’ students will show differences in employability. In such a way that workers will perceive more employability than post-graduates’ students.

Hypothesis 2: There will be differences in employability by gender. In such a way that men will perceive more employability than women.

2 METHODOLOGY

2.1 Sample and Procedure

The sample of this study was composed of a total of 132 subjects, residents of the Valencian Community (Spain) and of Spanish nationality. Of these, 45.83% are men and 54.17% women, with an average age of 38 years (S.D. = 12.04). 50% are workers already introduced in the labor market and the other 50% are postgraduate students ready to enter in the labor market.

The sample of the workers is composed of 66 workers, of them, 50% are women and 50 men. The average age of this sample is 42 years (S.D = 11.42). The sample of postgraduate students is composed of 66 students, of them 41.67% are men and 58.33% are women. The average age of the participants in the study is 25 years (S.D = 1.23).

The study design was cross-sectional. Data was collected through one self-report questionnaire completed voluntarily by the participants. Before applying the questionnaire to the sample, they were informed of the general objective of the study and they provided their informed consent. The researchers stressed that anonymity and confidentiality were guaranteed, that there were no right or wrong answers, and that they should answer the questions as honestly as possible (Podsakoff, Mackenzie, Lee & Podsakoff, 2003).
2.2 Measures

Employability was measured through Employability Appraisal Scale (EAS) [2]. This questionnaire measures perceived employability and includes 5 dimensions.

The first dimension, employment protective behavior (12 items) measures personal characteristics and how people develop them in the workplace (Alpha = .72). The second dimension employment risk (10 items) measures the skills that workers have to be able to carry out all the tasks required by his/her job (Alpha = .62). The third dimension job-seeking behavior (6 items) measures if the skills and training that the worker has are enough to be able to find a new job (Alpha = .67). The fourth dimension Self-control (4 items) measures the personal skills to manage his/her character in different situations (Alpha = .67). The fifth dimension, Self-learning (3 items) measures adaptation to change and the willingness to continuous improvement (Alpha = .63). All these dimensions were assessed on a five-point scale (1 = never, 5 = always).

2.3 Analysis

Means and standard deviations for the studied variables were calculated, as well as Pearson bivariate correlations. Secondly, to test hypothesis 1 (there will be differences in the perception of employability between active workers and postgraduate students) and hypothesis 2 (there will be differences in the perception of employability depending on the gender of the people) Student t-test was performed on all study dimensions of employability.

3 RESULTS

Descriptive statistics of employability with their respective dimensions are presented in Table 1. As we can see, participants in this study have medium levels of employability, with the highest mean in the dimension of protective behaviors of employment (4.53) and the lowest one in the dimension risk of employment (2.75).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>DT</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Protective behaviors of employment</td>
<td>4.53</td>
<td>.34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Risk of employment</td>
<td>2.75</td>
<td>.51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Behaviors of job searching</td>
<td>4.03</td>
<td>.42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Self-control</td>
<td>3.78</td>
<td>.58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Self-learning</td>
<td>4.13</td>
<td>.52</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

To study the differences between students and workers in the dimensions of employability Student t-test was performed (table 2). The results have shown that three of the dimensions of employability displayed statistically significant differences. In this way, workers had a greater perception of employability than students in the dimensions of self-control (t = -2.06, p = .049), self-learning (t = 2.04, p = .020), and perception of control of employment (t = -1.44, p = .006). These results support partially our hypothesis 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dimensions of employability</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Media</th>
<th>SD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Self-control</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>3.70</td>
<td>.58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Post-Graduated Worker</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>3.89</td>
<td>.56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>t = -1.87 p = .002</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-learning</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>4.03</td>
<td>.43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Post-Graduated Worker</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>4.23</td>
<td>.59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>t = 2.04 p = .020</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
To study the differences in the perception of employability depending on gender, t-student tests have been carried out in the different dimension of employability (table 3).

Our results have shown that two dimensions of employability displayed statistically significant differences. Then, men have a greater perception of employability than women in the dimension self-control ($t = 1.23$, $p = .044$) and perception of control of employment ($t = -1.37$, $p = .001$).

Table 3. Differences between men and women in the dimensions of employability.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dimensions of employability</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Media</th>
<th>SD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Self-control</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Men</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>3.86</td>
<td>.51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>3.73</td>
<td>.63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>$t = 1.23$</td>
<td>$p = .044$</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

4 CONCLUSIONS

Employability is one of the most important competences for employees to face with challenges of the labor market on the current work environment. In this study, we aimed to gain more insight about the difference on employability between active workers and post-graduate students. Additionally, we want to know if there are differences on employability between men and women.

Our results indicate that specifically for active workers the dimensions of employability associated with self-control and self-learning are higher and signifiatively different to post-graduate students, supporting our hypothesis 1. These findings are consistent with previous research showing a link between workers perception of competences like problem-solving, interactional skill, efficiency, and so on and their higher perception of employability [3]. Interestingly, we found that the dimension of employability “employment protective behavior”, namely, how people develop personal characteristics in the workplace, is the highest in our total sample and there is not difference between workers and postgraduate students. However, the dimensions of employability more related with personal resources in which individuals have some control [3] present significate differences between active workers and postgraduate students. These results suggest that people with higher perception of employability (in this study, they are active worker) are who feel personal skills to manage his/her in different situations, can adapt to the changes and willingness to continuous improvement: They also think that finding a job depend on their personal characteristics. In this sense, as Wanberg et al. [7] suggests, postgraduates’ students who are in transition from university to the workplace, probably perceive that the current company’s context make difficult this process, affecting their perception of employability.

On the other hand, our results indicate that for men the dimensions of employability associated with self-control are higher and significative different to women, supporting our hypothesis 2. These findings are consistent with previous research that suggest professional (and academic) mechanisms of discrimination in the working world [2]. In the same way, our results show that gender could influence job behavior and men could engage in job seeking more easily than women [9]. However, our results also show that men perceive more employability because they perceive higher self-control. In this sense, men perceived more employability than women because they feel having more personal skills to manage different situations and they feel that finding a job depends on their personal characteristics. Once again, the dimensions of employability more related with personal resources in which individuals have some control [3] present significative differences between men and women and highlight the complex reality of women’ employability.

This study reveals important issues in relation to employability. However, we must be aware of some limitation that can affect our results. A first limitation of the study is that we used a cross-sectional research design. Furthermore, the use of self-reports can lead to common method bias. In addition, the Cronbach’s alpha for some dimensions studied were relatively low. However, it also true that Cronbach’s alpha values between 0.6 and 0.7 are acceptable, in particular when a scale does not consist of many items [11].

Nevertheless, our findings have several implications for managers and HR practitioners. Firstly, protective behaviors of employment, namely, to develop personal characteristics in the workplace, is a
good way of people to feel to be employable. In this sense, companies may play an important role in providing an environment in which protective work behaviors of employment are encouraged, especially for postgraduates and women people. Moreover, considering that postgraduates and women are faced with less perception of employability compared to active workers, investing in protective development programs is likely to result in more employability, as well as positive attitudes and commitment toward challenges of current labor context.

On the other hand, to have a higher self-control and perception of control of employment could generate greater perception of employability on people who have low perception of employability. Following our result, it would be especially convenient to develop these aspects in students and women.

In conclusion, our results suggest that the ability of the person to manage their behavior (self-control), the ability to adapt to change and continuous improvement (self-learning), and the perception of being able to find work (perception of control of employment), are the factors that facilitate employability. This could help workers and nonworkers to become better managers of their employability and career development.

REFERENCES


