

What's your "Employability Score"?

A career development whitepaper from the University of British Columbia's (UBC) Sauder School of Business – Continuing Business Studies

***Synopsis** – Learning about Project Management practices and sharpening your ability to lead project teams, offers an opportunity to build your 'employability score' and stay relevant in an evolving economy.*

Few would argue that today's employment market is different to that of the past. The great recession of 2008-09, the economic disruption of COVID-19 and the continued trend towards globalization, mean that for many people the concept of "job for life" is dead. Today's workers know that the chances of them keeping the same role, or even the same employer, throughout their career is slim, and changing jobs is a reality many professionals will have to face multiple times in their careers.

For some changing jobs may be relatively easy. If you're working in an expanding sector or have solid experience in the latest hot trend, the demand for employees may be outstripping supply. While the lucky few may be in such a position, those in the mainstream majority are not. Although those in the majority may have good solid experience that is of value in their current role, should their current role disappear, it would be harder for them to translate their experience into something of value elsewhere. Some may have become specialized in a small niche that isn't easily transferrable to another position, while others may be more generalists whose lack of specialized knowledge means they are a poor fit for roles offered in the marketplace. Should the need to move positions arise such people may have trouble finding a suitable opportunity. Whether it be making a lateral move within the same organization or finding a different role with a new employer, many people are nervous about the challenge such a move may represent.

That nervousness is being compounded by the shifting realities of the global economy. As the economies of the world continue to mature and integrate, workers in all countries are facing a common set of questions. What can I do to remain relevant in a changing economy? What can I do to not just survive, but also to thrive in my career? In my twenties and thirties it may have been easy to find a new role, but will it be as easy once I'm in my forties, fifties or even sixties? The answers to those questions and the follow through actions that working professionals take, can spell the difference between lifelong productive employment and a struggling career interspersed with periods of career stress, underemployment or even unemployment.

Proactive professionals recognize that staying relevant is a lifelong effort. It means gaining ever-increasing levels of skill and experience. It means staying up to date with trends, technologies and developments. It means keeping your eyes open, building professional connections and broadening horizons. Settling into a comfort zone and staying there may no longer be an option and those with the skills and capabilities demanded by employers are those who will survive, thrive and drive the future economy.

To remain relevant working professions need to think about their 'employability': If my current role were to disappear how easy would it be for me to move into a new role? Although we may not consciously recognize it we all have an '**employability score**'. Our

employability score is a measure of how easy (or difficult) it would be to find a new role should the need arise. The higher our employability score the easier it would be for us to find a role we really wanted. The lower our score, the more trouble we would have and the greater the chances that we might be facing a period of unemployment or the need to take a role that is significantly below what we were used to. For the purposes of discussion we could quantify the employability score using a scale 1 to 5:

Employability score 1 – I would find it very hard to get another job. My skills are either too specialized that they aren't relevant to the current job market or I've never developed the types of skills that might make it easy to land a new role (either within my current organization or externally if need be). If I lose my current role I would find it very difficult to land a new one at the same level of responsibility or income level.

Employability score 2 – I likely could find another job, but it might take a significant amount of time and I might be facing extended periods of unemployment, which could potentially mean I have to take a role below what I am used to.

Employability score 3 – I have skills and capabilities that would appeal to other employers, but I would have to work hard at finding a new role.

Employability score 4 – I would find it relatively easy to get a new role, but I might have to take what was on offer rather than selecting something that I really wanted.

Employability score 5 – People are already offering me roles. If need be, I could have a new role in just a few days. I have the option of choosing roles that are of interest to me rather than being forced to take what is on offer.

Some working professionals are mindful of their employability score and make a conscious effort to keep theirs up. Others may have settled into their comfort zone, done the job, taken the paycheck and quietly forgotten about the investment needing to be made if they are to keep up with everyone else. While they may get lucky and the need to change roles never comes up, today's economy can bite when you least expect it. A merger, a restructuring, out-sourcing, a new leader with a different vision, changing technologies or shifting markets can all mean an unpleasant surprise awaits those who are ill prepared.

The recognition of that risk is the driver that leads the proactive to take a hands-on approach to their career development. They remain attuned to the needs of their current employer but also keep an eye on the broader job market as a whole. They invest in self-development and recognize that learning is a lifelong journey not a one-time deal.

The realization of that risk (e.g. being laid-off and struggling to find a new role) is the jarring awakening that kicks the more reactive into action. Leaving them in a position of weakness, those with a low employability score often only recognize the risks they were taking when faced with a crisis. For some that may come after years of career neglect and catching up to the demands of modern employers and the other candidates in the job market can be a steep hill up which to climb.

No matter whether you're a proactive or reactive person, when the realization hits, you'll need to strategize how to attain a higher employability score. Doing that requires us to align our personal skills development efforts with the needs, wants and expectations of

employers. There is little point in perfecting a skill that no one wants or taking an approach to professional development that is out of tune with modern thinking.

Doing that requires that we recognize that the job market is changing. In the old economy, academic credentials and years in the role were used as barometers of employability. As long as you could present yourself relatively professionally in a job interview, having the right credentials and the prerequisite years of experience in a related role, might be enough to get you the job. In today's job market academic credentials still matter, but in many nations employers are becoming more selective in who they hire. Looking for people with the right "fit", employers are increasingly focusing on skills and work style in addition to paper-based credentials. Furthermore, while academic learning is good, can you translate that into meaningful action in the workplace? Can you deliver value for the organization and can you function as a productive member of a team? Knowledge is a good starting point, but not a final destination. Employers want people who can translate knowledge into applied skill and "results achieved" is becoming the measure of success by which professionals are judged and employability scored.

That message is reinforced when you talk to senior managers and CEO's. If you ask them about what they want from their employees, you'll often find that answers are relatively simple and consistent. Often their answers link back to one simple idea; they want people who can deliver positive results and who can do so with minimal support. At the most elemental level they want people who can take on an activity and deliver results without the need for handholding or guidance. They want people with the initiative to overcome problems rather than a tendency to create problems and increasingly there is a movement towards hiring people who are team workers rather than prima donnas or solo stars. In essence they want people who can be assigned an activity and who through their own efforts can "get things organized" and "make things happen". Given the complexity of modern organizations and the often challenging nature of dealing with stakeholders it takes a broad "portfolio of skills" to do that. However that is what employers want and hence the goal towards which those trying to attain a high employability score need to strive.

There have been a number of career development focused studies in recent years that cast light on what that "portfolio of skills" includes. Leadership skills, organizational skills, communication skills and the ability to work as a team are usually the focal points of the findings. Certainly specific technical skills are required for many roles, but technical skills are now just a part of a broader equation. Work is now usually done in teams and the ability to work with others is becoming a core concern for employers. That means having the ability to lead when needed or follow when required. It means building relationships with people, leveraging their skills and integrating your own efforts with the capabilities of others. While it means working effectively in a team, it also means adding clear and measurable "value" to the efforts of the organization as a whole.

The recognition of the types of skills employers most value needs then to be paired up with an understanding that the continual changes in the economy have also driven changes in the way many organizations structure their work. The push for efficiencies and the need to continually respond to changing markets has seen a growth in the number of organizations using projects as vehicles through which to implement their strategies and achieve their goals. A project can be defined to be "any non-routine work activity in which work efforts are directed towards the achievement of a set of predefined objectives". Building something, developing a new product, solving problems, improving things and a host of other initiatives

can be thought of as “projects”. Although the idea of projects have existed throughout history, more organizations are recognizing that a significant portion of the work they do can be thought of as projects, and as such, more and more organizations are using “project” and “Project Management” type language to help them manage their work. So strong is the trend that in some nations the phrases “Project Manager”, “Project Management” and “Project Leader” are among the most common job titles or skills requested in job postings. The shift to organizing work into projects means that more and more people are finding that leading or participating in projects is becoming a part of their professional role (even if they don’t have the formal job title of Project Manager).

For the individual, projects can be an opportunity to build up your employability score. Because projects are the vehicles through which changes are introduced to an organization, leading, or participating in projects can be a way to broaden horizons and gain new experiences. Projects require leadership, they require creativity and they require focused decision-making. Participating in those types of work activities allows a person to deepen their knowledge and develop new skills. Furthermore, a person who clearly created value in the project will often stand out from their peers. That can be a platform upon which to earn the respect of peers, supervisors and management. While a single successful project can be an opportunity to shine, a string of successes can become a portfolio of experiences upon which a higher employability score is based. Those who seize those opportunities, and have the skill set to deliver, are those who are more likely to succeed in life and remain relevant to what the job market is looking for.

The growing emphasis on “projects” and the recognition of the role projects play in building up a person’s employability score is driving an increased interest in learning more about Project Management practices and Project Leadership skills. Project Management is a set of organizational tools used to define, structure and manage project type work. Project Leadership is about focusing a team towards a goal and translating a team’s potential into delivered results. Among other things, such knowledge and skills helps ensure that projects are properly defined, project work is approached systematically, decision-making is optimized and everyone’s efforts are properly coordinated. When done well, Project Management and Project Leadership practices ensure the efficient use of resources and help maximize the value from the investments made into the project.

Projects are however no magic potion and simply calling an activity a project is no guarantee of success. As many organizations have found, although structuring work into projects makes sense, using projects to deliver value takes skill. The simple fact that a project has been created and someone appointed Project Manager, does not guarantee that the investment made will achieve its desired results. Unfortunately many organizations have found out what happens when a project goes off the rails. Eating up time, money and resources, such projects can quickly run out of control. Sadly, stories of failed projects are easy to find and the Internet is full of stories of projects that have gone awry^[2]. Costly for the organization and stressful for the individuals involved failed projects can have lasting consequence. Lost opportunities, financial pain, loss of market position and damaged reputations are all potential outcomes when a project fails. For the individuals involved, a serious failure can also put a dent in their personal reputation, as well as being a source of personal stress.

The starting point for avoiding such problems lies in proper education. Having Project Managers, Project Sponsors and team members who all understand Project Management

practice offers the opportunity for people to collaborate more effectively. From an organizational perspective having a common understanding of Project Management terminology, utilizing the same Project Management methodology and knowing how to use the Project Management tools can sharpen decision-making, improve communications and help ensure resources are used efficiently. From the individual's perspective, having Project Management knowledge and having Project Leadership skills better positions you to be a valuable member of the team and hence further develop your skills and knowledge.

For the individual who is interested in getting more involved in their organization's projects, or who wants to formalize their understanding of Project Management practices, a foundation course in Project Management is a good starting point. Although there are alternate Project Management programs available, as with all things, not all of them are born equal. People who are genuinely interested in studying Project Management need to prepare themselves with some basic knowledge of what to look for in the class they choose.

Here at the Sauder School of Business Continuing Business Studies center we believe our formula for teaching Project Management and Project Leadership is among the best available. Written by practitioners for practitioners, our in-class or online '**Certificate in Project Management**' program was developed by experienced Project Managers who know what it takes to lead projects in today's modern organizations. Balancing the traditional structured approaches to Project Management with the emergent discipline of Agile Project Management, our program leverages industry recognized best practices. Based around worked examples and case studies that illustrate the concepts in use, the classes in our program focus on applied knowledge rather than just theory from a book.

All of our tutors and instructors are experienced practitioners and as a team we have a broad range of business backgrounds from which to share experiences. We continually develop increased levels of insight and understanding by undertaking original research into the field of Project Management and Project Leadership. That research is leveraged in our training and helps keep our content current.

For those who have made the decision that they want to use projects as a vehicle for maintaining a higher employability score, the rewards can be considerable. The investments made in training and a willingness to get involved in project type work can open doors, lead to new experiences and help build the situational awareness needed to be at the leading edge of their professions. It is often a good way to meet more people, build a professional network and can be an opportunity to gain insights and understanding of professional disciplines beyond your own. As you plan out your career development and consider your next steps, reviewing how Project Management knowledge and Project Leadership type skills fit into that picture can be a step well worth taking.

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