

1 About employability

What is employability?

A modern, competitive economy needs workers who possess skills, knowledge and attitudes they can take to any work situation and have the ability and willingness to continually adapt and prosper in a changing world. Universities and employers have attempted to define a sub-set of skills, which we have referred to as “employability skills” as well as the specialist knowledge and skills necessary for a particular role.

Employability skills have been defined after extensive collaboration with business by the CBI as²:

A set of attributes, skills and knowledge that all labour market participants should possess to ensure they have the capability of being effective in the workplace – to the benefit of themselves, their employer and the wider economy.

Employability skills include:

Self-management – readiness to accept responsibility, flexibility, resilience, self-starting, appropriate assertiveness, time management, readiness to improve own performance based on feedback/reflective learning.

Teamworking – respecting others, co-operating, negotiating/persuading, contributing to discussions, and awareness of interdependence with others.

Business and customer awareness – basic understanding of the key drivers for business success – including the importance of innovation and taking calculated risks – and the need to provide customer satisfaction and build customer loyalty.

Problem solving – analysing facts and situations and applying creative thinking to develop appropriate solutions.

Communication and literacy – application of literacy, ability to produce clear, structured written work and oral literacy – including listening and questioning.

Application of numeracy – manipulation of numbers, general mathematical awareness and its application in practical contexts (e.g. measuring, weighing, estimating and applying formulae).

Application of information technology – basic IT skills, including familiarity with word processing, spreadsheets, file management and use of internet search engines.

Underpinning all these attributes, the key foundation, must be a **positive attitude**: a ‘can-do’ approach, a readiness to take part and contribute, openness to new ideas and a drive to make these happen.

Frequently mentioned by both employers and universities is **entrepreneurship/enterprise**: broadly, an ability to demonstrate an innovative approach, creativity, collaboration and risk taking. An individual with these attributes can make a huge difference to any business.

When graduates enter the labour market, businesses expect them to be able to draw on these employability skills. Definitions of employability skills used by universities often differ slightly from the CBI definition; in particular, they emphasise the skills that are acquired through higher education, such as research skills, managing complex information and critical thinking. But the interviewees in this report all recognised that the CBI definition encompassed most of the attributes they were seeking to instil in their students (in the case of universities) or looking for in their employees (in the case of employers). All participants made a clear distinction between these skills and what students needed to know to apply for a job, such as CV writing and interview techniques, although they recognised that the latter are also necessary in teaching students and graduates how to demonstrate that they possess the employability skills themselves.