

Employability in practice

Work is one of the main elements that gives a person status in society. Work gives a person a sense of importance, and the degree of importance is defined by comparison with the work of others.

Workers are entitled to greater social recognition than non-workers. Workers contribute to society's projects, pay income tax and participate in societal programs. Non-workers are excluded because they do not participate in the same way and often must depend on programs such as social assistance, which are costly and generally unpopular among workers.

This exclusion is felt even more deeply by those who are already marginalized by society because they have committed a criminal offence. In their case, the "excluded" label is added to a "delinquent" label. These labels combine to place them very low on society's scale of usefulness and social desirability, making it that much tougher for them to make positive changes in their lives.

The term employability is frequently used in the context of vocational assessment to describe an individual's ability to find, adapt to and keep a job.⁽²⁾ This article chronicles how the concept of employability is put into practice at the Quebec Region's Regional Reception Centre-both in assessing and developing programming plans for offenders.

Developing employability In our society, employability is of the utmost importance. It is logical, therefore, that part of our correctional function is to make offenders more employable. Of course, this policy assumes that we are able to both identify offender shortcomings and do something about them.

A three-step process has been developed to help offenders become more employable.⁽³⁾ The first step is to develop a method for evaluating the individual's occupational personality. Second, predict the occupational potential or ability to learn, and pursue progress after their first work placement. Finally, ensure that the individual adapts to work by providing programming focused on the modification or improvement of essential employment-related behaviours.

Essential employment-related behaviours are behaviours related to looking for work, obtaining work and maintaining work. Other key behaviours relate to an individual's social, community and personal lives.⁽⁴⁾

However, employability is not just determined by factors related to job training and occupational skills. Management of factors such as free time, money, attire, accommodation, ability to travel, family relations, personal stability and health also have a direct impact on employability.

Measurement of employability factors When evaluating an offender's (or anyone else's) employability, several criteria must be addressed. In addition to the regular factors mentioned earlier, we must consider an offender's ability to learn, scholastic aptitude and possession (or lack) of employment-related generic skills.

Personality criteria should also be considered. We must try to understand and work with the offender's personal characteristics and ability to adapt and participate in the labour market and society.

At the Regional Reception Centre, we are specifically concerned with evaluating an offender's degree of

employability upon reception, identifying the reasons for their trouble in adapting to the labour market and, ultimately, recommending tangible ways of making them more employable.

We use interviews to gather psychological, social and background information, and psychometric and academic evaluation instruments to obtain information related to the employability evaluation factors.

We also use a generic skills evaluation laboratory to obtain qualitative data on offenders' ability to perform specific tasks common to several trades.

Psychometric tests Three types of psychometric tests are generally used: a personality test, intellectual performance tests and interest inventories.

The personality test provides an overall picture of offender personal characteristics. This test is used primarily to determine whether the offender is likely to become personally involved in tasks, and whether they are responsible, motivated, independent, determined and likely to invest in interpersonal relationships.

In short, we analyze offender personalities to determine whether they can interact effectively with others in a work environment. When shortcomings are identified, we then recommend suitable programming.

The aptitude and intellectual performance tests provide a picture of offenders' ability to reason, learn, concentrate, understand and retain learned concepts, and use such concepts appropriately to achieve a goal. This is very important as offenders will be expected to acquire concepts and eventually use them in employment situations.

For a variety of cultural, family, personal and other reasons, many offenders have not explored their personal interests in a structured manner and lack information on the jobs and training programs that are currently available.

Interest inventories help to determine whether offenders have made sound choices based on their basic interests. An offender who is unable to make choices and is instead willing to leave the future to chance is often unable to satisfy an employer's demands, which inevitably leads to a lost job.

This doesn't just mean losing a job, it often also means losing hard-won self-confidence.

Evaluation of academic knowledge Although employability does not solely depend on education, the knowledge and skills essential to a trade are usually acquired at school. A certain level of academic knowledge is also required for admission to trade-training programs.

We estimate that more than half of all inmates have not completed the ninth grade, and many have just an elementary-school education. Such offenders are ineligible for vocational programs. It is, therefore, essential that they receive the education they lack.

The centre uses two tests to determine inmate educational levels and recommend suitable academic programs. The first is the Canadian Adult Achievement Test, which was developed by the Correctional Service of Canada and is available in English and French.

The second is a Quebec Department of Education placement test that identifies the section of the academic program that corresponds to the inmate's knowledge level. This makes it possible to determine the exact level at which an offender should begin academic training.

Specific attention is also paid to learning disabilities. Poor cognitive skills can significantly affect both academic performance and ability to adapt to work and social life. We identify disabilities precisely enough through psychometric evaluation that we can recommend exercises to enhance the specific cognitive functions affected by the learning disability. This technique should, in the long term, improve the offender's ability to learn and function adequately in work and social environments. We further believe that it also helps offenders benefit from other institutional programming.

A generic skills-evaluation laboratory To obtain meaningful information on offender skills and attitudes, we recommend to offenders that they take part in structured activities that correspond to various trades. They can choose workshops in woodworking, commercial cooking, wiring, sheet metal, small-engine mechanics, welding, drafting, machining or plumbing.

These activities provide information on an offender's:

- dexterity;
- co-ordination;
- ability to discern shapes, spaces and dimensions;
- problem-solving and mathematical skills;
- ability to use measurement tools, organize thoughts and establish a sequence of tasks;
- ability to understand and follow verbal, graphic and audiovisual instructions; and
- ability to interpret written instructions, read and understand graphs and tables, communicate ideas, and ask insightful questions.

These exercises also provide objective information on characteristics such as tenacity and perseverance, self-control, self-confidence, adaptability and flexibility, initiative and autonomy.

In short, this laboratory evaluation allows for assessment of generic skills, generic and specific abilities, the transferability of occupational potential, and active and passive adaptability.

Intervention methods The Correctional Service of Canada offers a wide range of services and programs that are designed to help most inmates, while respecting individual needs. These services and programs are designed to foster personal growth and promote the acquisition of psychosocial skills and academic and job knowledge, as well as emotion (particularly anger) management. Substance abuse treatment is also offered.

Many of these programs work toward developing essential employment-related behaviours. As factors other than academic and occupational training have a direct impact on offender employability, these personal development programs are recommended.

Employability in practice It is an established and respected principle that employability is a vital component of self-esteem and a sense of belonging. It is also true that offenders, perhaps more than others, tend to have problems in this area.

The Quebec Region's Regional Reception Centre is making concerted efforts to improve understanding of the problems associated with being unemployable. Our analyses compel us to find more effective means of diagnosing employability problems and of recommending the most suitable response programs.

Our intervention program for learning disabilities is a current and concrete example of these efforts. However, this must be the beginning of a trend, and not a one-time effort.

(1)246 Montée Ganon. Sainte-Anne-des-Plaines, Quebec J0N 1H0.

(2)P. Dodier, *Problématique et gestion opérationnelle de l'employabilité chez la clientèle carcérale*, 14th National Consultation on Vocational Counselling, Ottawa, 1988.

(3)P. Dodier, *Un modèle de gestion opérationnelle de l'employabilité pour la clientèle en milieu carcéral*, Unpublished manuscript, 1986.

(4)Dodier, *Un modèle de gestion opérationnelle de l'employabilité pour la clientèle en milieu carcéral*.