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EMPLOYABILITY AND PERSONALITY.

Several years ago, Joyce and I visited the maximum security prison in McAlester, Oklahoma, and talked with some dangerous prisoners. Several of them asked us if we would hire them when they were released. This was the first time I thought seriously about «employability».

The concept of employability is interesting for several reasons.

- First, it implies that there are individual differences in employability – which also means that people are to some degree responsible for their own employability.
- Second, if people are responsible for their own employability, then that creates a role for assessment – enhancing employability through strategic self-awareness.
- Third, although the concept of employability has been around in applied psychology since the 1920s, it has been almost entirely ignored by the academics.
- And finally, the changes in the world economy that have been going on since the 1970s have created widespread unemployment, job insecurity, and churn in the labor markets, all of which highlights the importance of employability.

Little is known in an empirical way about the determinants of employability, so the following comments are necessarily speculative. It seems to me that employability has three facets. The first concerns the characteristics that people need in order to get hired.

This in turn means having the characteristics that hiring managers want to see in applicants. What might they be? Joyce Hogan has done the only systematic research on this topic (which she could not get published in an academic journal). She subscribed to the major newspaper in each of 11 census regions of the United States for one year. She collected the employment ads, and then content analyzed them (there were several thousand) to see what employers wanted in new hires. Her major finding was that the most important thing employers wanted to see at any hiring level was social skill – the ability to get along with colleagues and clients and work productively with others. Conversely, cognitive ability was not a priority for employers. In a nutshell, getting hired depends on bright side characteristics.

The second facet of employability concerns the characteristics that people need in order to retain their jobs. This, in turn, means having the characteristics that supervisors want to see in incumbents. And this is where the literature on derailment and the dark side becomes important. As most people know, dark side characteristics: (1) co-exist with attractive bright side characteristics; (2) always have a valuable component to them; but (3) end up eroding relationships over time, leading to job stagnation or dismissal.

The third facet of employability concerns the characteristics that people need to manage «career transitions» – to find another job after a company is downsized, to find another job after retiring from the first one, to succeed after being promoted to a job with new demands, etc. What seems important here is: (a) the desire to do well in a new job; and (b) flexibility, adaptability, and the capacity to change. The reader will note that all three facets concern personality and not cognitive ability.

Although academic psychology has largely overlooked the employability issue, real job seekers and job holders usually get the point. There are many non-profit and for profit organizations that help the unemployed find work. Training for finding employment focuses on impression management and networking, two major aspects of social skill. People are taught strategic self-awareness – how they will be perceived during an employment interview and what to do about it – and the importance of taking ownership in their job search by making constant inquiries and developing contacts. In one job search club for unemployed professionals, members are told that they are their own worst enemies when it comes to finding new jobs, that there is something about their attitudes, fears, and expectations about what they deserve from a job that explain their inability to find work. The task is to reconstruct and reinvent themselves, to learn to project a positive and optimistic attitude during the job search, to emphasize their flexibility, and downplay their need for stable, continuous, and predictable employment.

Managers and executives seeking new employment need to work on strategic selfawareness – how they are perceived and how to change the perceptions when they are counter-productive. Knowledge workers – network engineers, system administrators, IT specialists, and software developers – must take an entirely different approach. For them the key is to stay up to date regarding industry changes and new technology. Smart players are obsessively concerned about obsolescence, and develop multiple strategies for staying current. They are so sensitive to this issue that they engage in constant skill development even when they have excellent, well-paid, and desirable jobs. Knowledgeable readers will immediately recognize that the syndrome of obsessively staying up to date is a function of

the HPI dimensions of Ambition, Inquisitive, and Learning Style, and not a function of cognitive ability.

Finally, it is worth noting that the best predictors of income or net financial worth are educational level and number of hours worked per week. Education level is related to cognitive ability, but so are conscientiousness and ambition and the correlations are about the same. Number of hours worked per week is almost entirely a function of conscientiousness and ambition. In the long run then, as Epictetus taught us, «Character is fate.»