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## Research report

September 2016

Attitudes to  
*employability*  
and *talent*



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# Attitudes to employability and talent

## Research report

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# Introduction

*‘While there is an assumption that individuals have the capacity to manage their own careers freely, in reality firms can choose which groups of individuals will receive access to jobs and what chances to enhance their careers they will be given.’*

The past few decades have seen a major shift in the work relationship. Where before job security represented the foundation of employers’ proposition to the workers, the new ‘deal’ has focused on supporting workers’ *employability* over the course of their careers and with multiple employers, rather than providing continuous and long-term employment in an organisation (Sullivan and Wong 2009; Dries et al 2014).

Compared with job security, employability is a far more elusive concept. Unlike a limited period of working for a single employer, it refers to the overall success of an individual in the labour market, spanning different job roles, modes of employment (for example, being self-employed or taking a zero-hours contract), and even multiple careers. As a result, the factors underpinning employability may involve anything from workers’ skills and attributes, enabling them to compete for specific jobs, to personal circumstances, requiring flexibility in ways of working, to labour market conditions, influencing availability of employment opportunities.

On the face of it, in the context of an uncertain world of work, employment relationships based on the promise of employability are advantageous both for employers and workers. To individuals they offer development of transferable skills, and resulting greater control over shaping their careers depending on their ambitions and personal needs. In return, organisations receive greater flexibility in shaping the workforce

according to the business need and agility in accessing a wider pool of skills, as employees seek to move jobs more frequently (Vanhercke et al 2014; McQuaid and Lindsay 2005; Baruch and Vardi 2016).

Yet, as the premise of the work relationship becomes less and less explicit, it is becoming more difficult for the parties to hold each other to account on their respective parts of the deal. Specifically, there is a risk of a potential shift in the balance of power further towards employers, who no longer have an obligation to provide job security, yet at the same time retain control over employment opportunities. While there is an assumption that individuals have the capacity to manage their own careers freely, in reality firms can choose which groups of individuals will receive access to jobs and what chances to enhance their careers they will be given.

An employability-based work relationship, therefore, raises important questions about the degree of empowerment and responsibility that different agents have in maintaining workers’ employability over the course of their careers. In particular, employers, as the main suppliers of jobs and career development opportunities, have lots of choices to make. Should these opportunities be made available to anyone in an organisation, or open to smaller groups of individuals in business-critical roles? What are the drivers of employers’ decisions to contribute to the employee’s future career path, beyond the current organisation? How and

when are employers prepared to support those less empowered to negotiate access to jobs and career development opportunities?

### **Purpose of this report and methodology**

This report aims to explore the attitudes towards employability and responsibilities for career development in the UK. It draws on data from focus groups with individuals working or looking for work, as well as surveys of HR practitioners and line managers from organisations of a range of sectors and sizes.

To explore *individuals'* views on employability, online focus groups were conducted with key employee segments from a mix of industries and locations. The following groups of participants were recruited from the YouGov online panel:

- employed in roles requiring in-demand skills (defined using UK National Shortage Occupation List, for example engineers, software development professionals, medical practitioners)
- employed in roles not requiring in-demand skills
- self-employed (currently working as a freelancer or in own business)
- short-term unemployed (unemployed for six months or less and looking for work)
- long-term unemployed (unemployed for over 12 months and looking for work).

To understand *employers'* views on employability we conducted two surveys. The first survey collected 1,078 responses from

HR practitioners in the UK, asking the participants to reflect on organisation-wide policies in talent management, career development and other areas. The second survey included 1,014 individuals with line management responsibilities working in UK organisations. It focused on the practice of talent management, as seen by those dealing with day-to-day management of staff performance and development needs. HR practitioners were recruited from the YouGov online panel and from the CIPD membership base, and line managers accessed via the YouGov panel.

### **Reporting the findings**

The following sections describe and compare the individuals' and employers' views on employability.

Section 1 focuses on how employability is viewed by these stakeholders, and specifically outlines the attributes that are associated with employment and career success.

Section 2 considers the mutual responsibilities of individuals and employers in the work relationship, while section 3 looks more closely at the factors within the organisational context that are associated with employers' approaches to talent management and career development.

The report concludes with a summary of the key findings and recommendations.

*'This report aims to explore the attitudes towards employability and responsibilities for career development in the UK.'*

# 1 What is employability?

*‘As employability is underpinned by multiple, often situational, factors, it is likely that there is a range of interpretations of what being “employable” means to individuals and employers.’*

As employability is underpinned by multiple, often situational, factors, it is likely that there is a range of interpretations of what being ‘employable’ means to individuals and employers. For instance, while some workers may consider the likelihood of securing jobs over the course of their career, others will focus on their short-term ability to secure a job. Similarly, depending on the context and the needs of a particular business, employers will have a greater or lesser degree of motivation and capacity to support individual development needs, and so will look for different signals of employability.

This section describes individual workers’ and employers’ definitions of ‘employability’ and a related concept of ‘talent’.

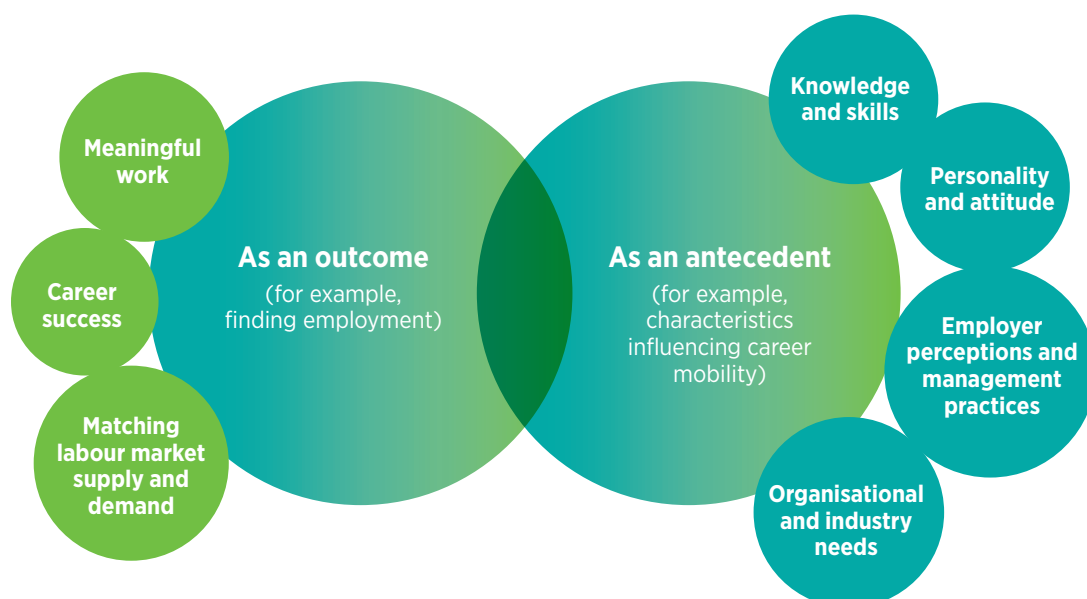
### Perspectives on employability

Employability has been defined as ‘a set of skills, knowledge and

*personal attributes that make an individual more likely to secure and be successful in their chosen occupation(s) to the benefit of themselves, the workforce, the community and the economy’* (Yorke 2004). While setting out clearly at least three necessary aspects of employability – characteristics of an employable individual; security and success in an occupation; and value added to multiple stakeholders – this definition also highlights the subjective nature of the concept, given how circumstantial all the underpinning components are.

The key challenge in understanding employability is in determining the criteria which would define someone as ‘employable’. In its broadest sense employability is about realising one’s career opportunities and aspirations, but in the short-term it is highly dependent on individuals securing (a number of) jobs

Figure 1: Theoretical frames describing employability



in organisations' internal and broader external labour markets (Fugate et al 2004; Forrier and Sels 2003). While interlinked, the two perspectives rely on different criteria of employability. One highlights individuals' characteristics, such as ability and motivation, that can support employability independently of the specific employment opportunities. The other focuses on the contextual factors influencing whether an individual would be successful in getting a job, progressing in their job or moving jobs (Forrier and Sels 2003; McQuaid and Lindsay 2005). Employability can, therefore, be considered both an antecedent to employment, or the characteristics influencing career mobility, and as an outcome, or the fact of finding employment (Dries et al 2014).

The difference between the two perspectives is important, as academics in the field have criticised the assumption that employability automatically leads to employment, since some 'employable' people struggle to find a job that meets their needs, while organisations are having recruitment difficulties. Clearly, while characteristics leading to 'employability' span a wide range of skills and personal attributes, translation of these factors into career success is, on the one hand, dependent on employers' subjective assessment of individuals as deserving job opportunities, and, on the other hand, individuals' subjective assessments of jobs as leading to career success. For instance, Clarke and Patrickson (2008) suggested that employees are focused on

'transitional' employability – finding a job and having the ability to move between organisations – whereas employers mainly consider 'functional' employability – matching employees' skills, knowledge and experience with organisational needs. In turn, these self-perceptions form the basis for negotiating employment 'deals' and further opportunities to pursue personal development and career goals (Dries et al 2014).

These theoretical perspectives on employability already highlight the potential for conflict between agents' views of the concept. For instance, characteristics that individuals are interested in developing in order to enhance their career success might not match employers' needs for value-adding skills. Understanding these divergent expectations may begin to highlight the issues of forming and maintaining a work relationship in the knowledge economy (Brown and Hesketh 2004). In view of these differences, we set out to explore the definitions of employability currently used by individuals and employers in the UK.

### Individuals' views of 'employability' and 'talent'

First, we asked groups of employed, self-employed and unemployed individuals to discuss their understanding of 'employability'. Across the employed and unemployed groups, the term was perceived as a basic ability to do a job, or a minimum set of characteristics necessary to be 'ticked off' in order for someone to be offered the chance of employment. As one respondent

said, *'[Employability means] you can do a job to an acceptable standard, but not brilliantly.'*

Throughout the discussion, it was clear that in the eyes of the respondents, the characteristics necessary for 'employability' were primarily defined by organisations, as agents holding the power to determine individuals' employment outcomes. As a result, for many respondents, there were negative connotations associated with the term 'employability', since this view suggests that employability is a form of judgement on an individual's ability to 'fit a certain mould'. Managing perceptions and marketing oneself to potential employers is an important part of being employable, as one unemployed respondent explained: *'I'm not [employable], because I don't have any experience. I've been rejected a lot because I can't prove I have a decent skillset, even though I believe I am capable of the work.'*

These findings are consistent with the perspective that employability is acquired through matching knowledge and competencies with employer demands (De Vos et al 2011), and the view that employers are focused on 'functional' employability – matching individual characteristics with business needs (Clarke and Patrickson 2008). The notion from the careers literature that employees are free agents in the new employment relationship, empowered to pursue the best career development opportunities for themselves, was less prevalent (Baruch and Vardi 2016). Few respondents associated employability with their long-term career goals.

Separately, we asked the respondents to reflect on their associations with the term ‘talent’, as this is a concept more often used in an organisational context. In contrast with employability being perceived as a ‘buzzword’, talent was seen by both employed and unemployed as a more meaningful and valuable attribute in the workplace. Rather than led by employers’ assessment of workers’ characteristics, talent was described as being more indicative of competence and expertise, as a specialist ability. It was also linked to potential and the ability to grow and excel. One self-employed participant said: *‘I think employability has more to do with the way things look when you’re applying for a job, and being talented is about making it become true and succeeding at the job, and growing with it.’*

There was some sense from the respondents that employability is a basic ability and willingness to work (a minimum to get a job), whereas talent is about going the extra mile and working to the best of your ability (necessary for

accessing further development opportunities and for progression) (see Table 1). While there was an understanding that talent doesn’t always translate into employability, since it can be difficult to demonstrate or be overlooked by employers, this concept is closer to the metaphor of free agency in the work relationship, as in discussing it respondents talked about their ability to utilise development and progression opportunities, not simply being given access to those.

### Attributes associated with employability and career success

Given the differences in how individuals interpreted the concepts of employability and talent, it was then interesting to explore the specific characteristics they associated with success in obtaining jobs and furthering their careers.

A number of attributes have been linked to employability in the academic literature (see Table 2). These include individual factors, such as levels of skills and knowledge, as well as demographic

**Table 1: Definitions of employability and talent, offered by individuals**

Employability	Talent
<i>‘Certain qualities that are useful to employers/transferable skills. It’s slightly negative as implies that some people do not meet this standard or are “unemployable”.’</i>	<i>‘Being particularly good at what you do – perhaps it is a specific skill within your workplace or perhaps generally good at your job. Your skills and experience fit and you excel because of it.’</i>
<i>‘Personally, I have good experience in retail, however, I have a disability so I believe that employers don’t see me as “employable”.’</i>	<i>‘Standing out from the crowd – having a USP.’</i>
<i>‘Adaptable and flexible to different types of work.’</i>	<i>‘I’d say talent is inherently more important, but you can’t test talent at a job interview exactly, so you look for employability and see where it goes from there. You need to give talent the time to show.’</i>
<i>‘For me, employability is all about the skills and experience you possess in order to fulfil requirements of a job.’</i>	<i>‘Talented suggests they can progress their career quickly (and have the ambition to do so), employable means they can do the job required of them.’</i>
<i>‘Being willing to do what it takes and what is needed.’</i>	



**Table 2: Employability framework (adapted from McQuaid and Lindsay 2005)**

Individual factors	Personal circumstances	External factors
<p><b>Skills and attributes</b> For example personal competencies, transferable skills, qualifications</p> <p><b>Demographic characteristics</b> For example age, gender</p> <p><b>Health and well-being</b> For example current physical/mental health; nature and extent of disability</p> <p><b>Job-seeking</b> For example effective use of formal search services; interview skills; awareness of type of opportunities in labour market</p> <p><b>Adaptability and mobility</b> For example geographical mobility; wage flexibility</p>	<p><b>Household circumstances</b> For example direct caring responsibilities</p> <p><b>Work culture</b> For example extent to which work is encouraged and supported within family/among peers</p> <p><b>Access to resources</b> For example access to transport and financial capital</p>	<p><b>Demand factors</b> For example level of competition for jobs; macroeconomic stability; employers' recruitment and selection processes</p> <p><b>Enabling support factors</b> For example accessibility of public services and job-matching technology; affordability of public transport and child care</p>

characteristics and health status, determining whether an individual is able to look for and perform a particular job. There is also a set of social circumstances, such as caring responsibilities or access to transport links, that act as a boundary for someone's participation in work. Finally, a range of external factors influence demand for skills, and the value of employment to an individual over unemployment.

Looking at the attributes associated with employability in the current study, the focus group respondents primarily mentioned meeting the requirements for skills, education and experience, as well as attitudes, such as flexibility, willingness to work and to perform. In contrast, when asked about what factors underpin success in the workplace, respondents generally felt that personality traits (including charisma and flexibility) have a stronger role than education and experience (see Table 3). Confidence was perceived as a key factor in employability and a fundamental trait of successful people in the workplace. Particularly among unemployed groups, there

was an underlying perception that successful people often display more 'assertive' traits, or play a political game to get ahead (for example staying on the right side of bosses). As one individual articulated: *'The most successful people push themselves to be noticed, have confidence to stand out and be listened to, but I can't say they are the best people at the job.'*

On the one hand, while 'employability' is seen to be determined by employers' expectations, achieving career success is linked to individual characteristics and abilities, which appears to give more power to the worker. Yet, at a closer look, the attributes underpinning career success in the workplace are the ones that allow workers to negotiate a better 'deal' through managing perceptions, thus placing the onus on the employer to distribute opportunities and outcomes of work. Once again, employers' subjective assessments of individuals, not a set of objective characteristics, sets the criteria for employability.

### Employers' views of employability and talent

Employers' side of the employability 'deal' is represented through the concept of 'talent'. In practice, talent management – processes of attracting, developing and retaining people – is recognised as a source of competitive advantage in the context of the current demographic trends and patchy availability of skills in home markets. Yet, the very definition of 'talent' lacks rigour, potentially leading to confusion in what can be described as good or effective talent management practice. Sometimes, 'talent' is used as a euphemism for 'people' – anyone working for an organisation, and, therefore, having potential to make a difference to organisational performance. Others apply the term to denote the organisational 'elites' – workers with highest potential to progress to and perform in business-critical roles.

Academic literature offers a number of perspectives on talent,

**Table 3: Factors underpinning employability and career success**

Individual factors	Personal circumstances	External factors
Knowledge, skills and education	<p><i>'For me, employability is all about the skills and experience you possess in order to fulfil requirements of a job.'</i></p> <p><i>'Skills, appearance, qualification and experience.'</i></p> <p><i>'You are capable of doing the job.'</i></p>	<p><i>'Highly qualified above fellow workers'.</i></p> <p><i>'Degree or higher in a related field and plenty of experience'.</i></p> <p><i>'Education got me to where I am, but from here, it's all down to experience, hard work and knowledge.'</i></p>
Willingness and attitude	<p><i>'Adaptable and flexible to different types of work'.</i></p> <p><i>'Being willing to do what it takes and what is needed'.</i></p> <p><i>'Wanting to work is big for me.'</i></p>	<p><i>'Not being afraid to take risks at times'.</i></p> <p><i>'Sacrificing home-life balance'.</i></p> <p><i>'Flexible, open-minded people who are keen to learn and compromise'.</i></p>
Confidence and tenacity	<p><i>'Confidence and belief in self are important.'</i></p>	<p><i>'I think [successful people] tend to be very focused and committed.'</i></p> <p><i>'Keep pushing ideas and researching new ways to gather information'.</i></p> <p><i>'Constantly learning and being proactive – using your own time to learn new things'.</i></p>
Managing perceptions	<p><i>'To an extent it can be about whether or not your face fits.'</i></p> <p><i>'If an employer feels you would fit in and be able to do the job'.</i></p> <p><i>'Being employable has a lot to do with the employer's perception of a potential employee. Background, appearance, ethnicity, gender, and so on. Not necessarily focused on skills and experience.'</i></p>	<p><i>'Being personally likeable is important.'</i></p> <p><i>'Good networkers; people who can talk to anyone'.</i></p> <p><i>'Making the most of opportunity'.</i></p>

largely determined by the focus of discipline studying the concept (see Table 4). For instance, in human resource management, talent is described through the level of value added to an organisation. Talented workers are then the ones who possess such capital and/or can make themselves useful in a business context. In contrast, educational psychology views talent as excellence in a particular area of knowledge and skills, with less focus on how that is applied in practice.

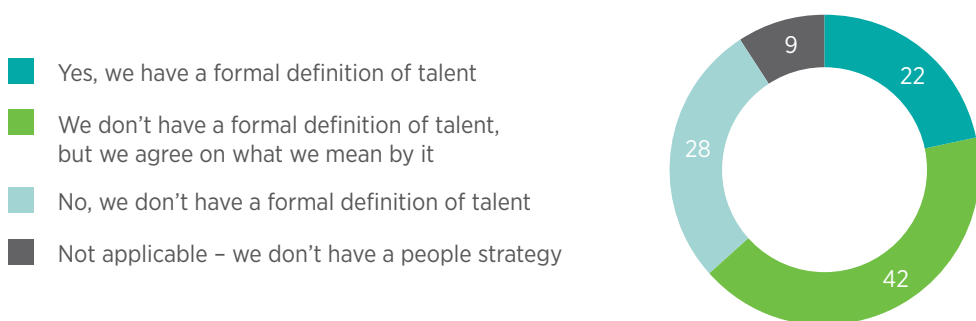
Already these two definitions give potentially mixed advice when investing in talent management and development activities.

In a survey of HR practitioners conducted for this report, only 22% of respondents said their organisation had a formal definition of 'talent' as part of their strategy. Encouragingly, a further 42% suggested that there is at least an informal agreement of what is understood by the concept.

**Table 4: Theoretical perspectives on talent**

Literature stream	Operationalisation of talent	Main criterion	Main contribution	Main gap
HRM	Talent as capital	Contribution to organisation	Links individual talent to organisational context	Lack of theory and empirical evidence
I/O psychology	Talent as individual difference	Predictive validity	Long research tradition in personnel selection, promotion systems, and performance appraisal	Criterion problem – talent for what?
Educational psychology	Talent as giftedness	Domain-specific excellence	Strong (causal) theoretical frameworks	Mostly conceptual work; no research in adult populations
Vocational psychology	Talent as identity	Self-concept crystallisation	Recognition of the dynamic nature of talent, as a construct, over the course of a person's life	Mostly narrative research; difficult to reconcile with more positivistic approaches
Positive psychology	Talent as strength	Self-actualisation	Treats positive outliers as research subjects of choice, rather than measurement error	Assumption of strength-based approach as 'win-win' for individuals and organisations
Social psychology	Talent as the perception of talent	Rater accuracy	Brings in element of social perception – that is, talent that is not acknowledged does not 'exist'	Generalisation of experimental findings to real-life settings?

**Figure 2: Does your organisation have a definition of 'talent' in your organisational/people strategy? (%)**



Base: all HR practitioners (n=1,078)

Yet, almost three in ten practitioners (28%) admitted to having no definition, despite having a strategy in place for the organisation and its people. This was more likely in the voluntary (45%) and in the public (37%) sectors, compared with organisations in the private sector (24%). Large organisations (31%) were significantly more likely than SMEs (8%) to have a formal definition of talent.

About half of all respondents (499) then provided their definition of talent in an open-ended format. The quality of these entries varied, as the survey participants were simply asked to describe how talent is defined by their organisation, without any criteria guiding their response (see Table 5).

**Table 5: Definitions of talent submitted by HR practitioners**

Individual factors	Personal circumstances
Skills, expertise	176 mentions that included references either to the importance of skills overall (for example, <i>'somebody who holds the very specialised skills that are required'</i> ), or listing the specific skills and expertise of someone considered to be talented (for example, <i>'those with specific and specialist skills in media and journalism'</i> ).  In addition, 18 definitions of 'talent' made specific references to the necessary level of qualifications achieved by an individual (for example, <i>'a degree in graphic design'</i> ).
Performance	157 mentions pointing at the contribution that an individual makes towards achieving business objectives, often referring to organisational measures of performance.  Some of these definitions stipulated that talent is simply ability to perform in a role (for example, <i>'how they perform in their job against set criteria'</i> ).  Other definitions in this category described exceptional performance (for example, <i>'ability beyond that normally expected so the job is done better'</i> ; <i>'going the extra mile for the business'</i> ).  21 definitions also referred to person–role and person–organisation fit, explaining that talent can be defined as such only within the context of a specific organisation (for example, <i>'recruits to the workplace who fit with our vision and strategy'</i> ).
Potential to progress to more senior roles	80 descriptions of individuals capable of performing in leadership positions in the future (for example, <i>'those that are identified as having the potential to reach senior management grades or positions'</i> ).
Individual qualities, motivation and attitude	55 mentions describing individual attributes (for example, <i>'hard-working'</i> ; <i>'enthusiastic'</i> ).
Potential to develop	52 descriptions of individuals capable of and/or committed to continued learning (for example, <i>'employees who have the potential, attitude and motivation to develop'</i> ).
Uniqueness	23 mentions of individuals with attributes that set them apart from others (for example, <i>'wow factor'</i> ; <i>'ability to do something special'</i> ; <i>'the best available in the field/sector at the time'</i> ).
Workforce	14 references to talent being a term denoting anyone working for an organisation (for example, <i>'people assets'</i> ).
Someone perceived as talented	6 responses suggesting that the definition of talent depends on the assessor of talent (for example, <i>'when a manager spots it'</i> ).
Other	23 definitions.

As seen from Table 5, respondents largely provided individual-level descriptions of 'talent', with the exception of two definitions that referred to the overall organisational capability. This suggests that talent is largely viewed as an individual attribute, possibly enabled by an organisation (through careful person–job match and training and development), but not as a cumulative attribute of a company as a whole.

The two most popular metaphors for individual 'talent' were expertise and contribution to business objectives, sometimes used in the respondents' descriptions alongside each other (for example, *'the skills and competencies required by the organisation to continuously improve and achieve our goals'*).

These definitions of talent offered by HR practitioners in the UK are

consistent with the 'talent as capital' perspective, prevalent in HRM. On the one hand, this perspective can help employers ensure that the individuals they attract and the development activities they invest in are consistent with the business strategy. On the other hand, it is likely that these attributes are difficult to define (due to the lack of robust evidence linking skills to performance in specific business contexts).

Less prevalent is a focus on 'potential', which is divided into 'potential to progress' – an exclusive approach aimed at developing a small number of individuals into senior roles through succession planning, and a more inclusive 'potential to develop' which offers opportunities to anyone willing to learn. The first approach similarly focuses on maximising the value of talent management activities to the business, where investment targets those who are likely to fulfil the so-called 'business-critical' roles. It can, however, undermine the premise of the employability-based work relationship, where more employees may be expecting development opportunities within their organisations, as part of the employment deal.

Interestingly, the responses of HR practitioners indicate the same imbalance of influence

that employers have in their assessment of workers' talent. Although only six definitions of talent offered by employers' representatives specifically referred to the role of perceptions, other response categories assumed that the individual employee must demonstrate specific characteristics matching the business needs: skills required by the organisation, levels of performance as defined and measured by the organisation, or potential for the future organisation's needs.

### Attributes associated with 'talent' in the workplace

In addition to the perspective taken in organisations' definitions of talent, perceptions of individual decision-makers play a role when identifying talented individuals in organisational practice. Even where formal guidance for assessment of talent is in place, those designing

and applying the guidance retain a – necessary – opportunity for subjective judgement in the process (Stanton et al 2010). For example, HR professionals preparing talent management policies will inevitably reflect their own understanding of the attributes that would make a valuable contribution to business objectives. Similarly, the values of line managers making recruitment decisions and assisting employee development will inevitably influence availability of opportunities to different employee groups.

To establish what is perceived as talent by different actors in organisations, we asked HR practitioners and line managers to select up to five key attributes that could be used to describe a talented employee from a list containing descriptions of individual worker characteristics.

**Figure 3: Attributes describing a talented employee, according to HR practitioners (%)**



Base: all HR practitioners (excluding don't know) (n=1,056)

**Figure 4: Attributes describing a talented employee, according to line managers (%)**



Base: all line managers (excluding don't know) (n=960)

There was a lot of similarity in the attributes submitted by the two groups of respondents, with attitudinal characteristics – such as good work ethic, going above and beyond in the job, and positive attitude to work – topping both HR practitioners’ and line managers’ lists of descriptions of a talented employee. Bringing in new ideas was also high on both lists, possibly reflecting the value attached to innovation and creativity in modern organisations. On the other hand, level of skills, ability to ‘get on’ with the job, and fit with the business context were of secondary importance, albeit still prominent for a large proportion of respondents.

The main difference between the two groups was in their ranking of employees’ ‘high potential to develop’, being critical to 52% of HR practitioners, but only 40% of line managers. Practitioners in large organisations (60%) were also more

likely than those in SMEs (43%) to report that having a ‘high potential to develop’ described a talented employee. Conversely, those working in SMEs were more likely to rate being ‘reliable’ and ‘having a good work ethic’ as descriptions of an employee with talent.

Given how subjective some of the attributes can be, perceptions of individual workers and their capability become extremely important when assessing ‘talentedness’. For example, previous research pointed at the role that unconscious bias plays in the perceptions of workers with different personal characteristics and backgrounds. These biases can then play out at the micro level, during recruitment interviews and succession planning discussions, as well as at the organisation level, when formulating programmes to reach out to specific diverse workforce groups.

The current survey asked the HR respondents to rate eight different groups of workers against attributes they used to describe a ‘talented employee’: young people (16–24-year-olds); older workers (55+); parents returning to work; individuals with disabilities; ex-offenders; long-term unemployed; ex-service men and women; and migrant workers. The full breakdown of scores is available in Appendix 1.

While the absolute ratings of the groups only go some way in reflecting the respondents’ true feelings and opinions, the scoring that one group received relative to other groups provides an indication of whether it could be viewed more positively or more negatively in the workplace. Looking at the top three attributes previously highlighted by HR practitioners as descriptions of ‘talent’, the responses reveal differences in perceptions of the workforce groups. For example, older

workers were seen to have a more positive attitude to work, but lower potential to develop, compared with young people. They were also rated the highest on their ability to hit the ground running, levels of relevant experience and skills, and being highly networked and connected.

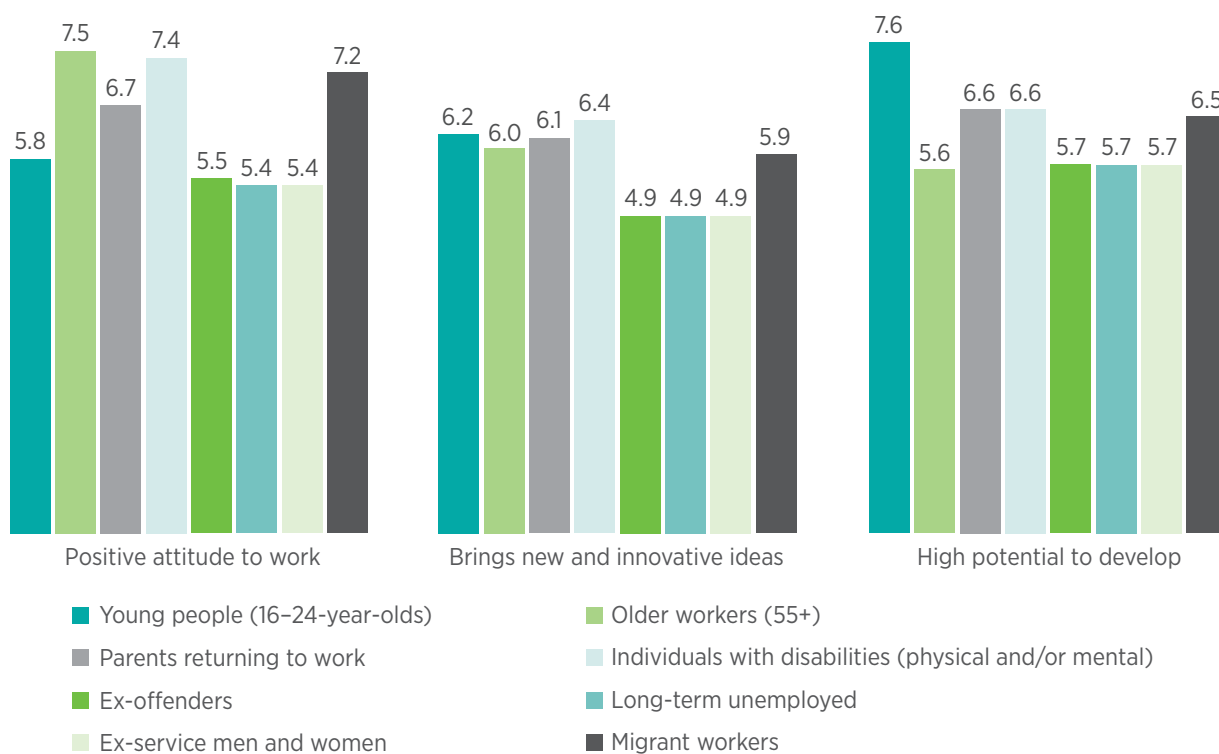
On the other hand, long-term unemployed, ex-offenders, and ex-service men and women scored

the lowest on the three attributes describing talented employees. Worryingly, this continued across most characteristics, including reliability, work ethic and being able to adapt to the working environment.

There was also some evidence to suggest that previous negative experiences influence future talent management practices. Respondents who reported

previous negative experience of managing diversity in their organisations were also less likely to target any of these workforce groups during recruitment, and assigned lower average scores to the groups when assessing them against organisational definitions of 'talent' (see Table 6). This link once again points at the role of subjective perceptions in employers' definitions of employability.

**Figure 5: Perception of groups according to organisational definitions of talent (rating on scale between 0 – poorly skilled and 10 – highly skilled)**



**Table 6: Current approaches to recruiting from diverse workforce groups (%)**

	Young people (16-24)	Older workers (55+)	Parents returning to work	Individuals with disabilities (physical and/or mental)	Ex-offenders	Long-term unemployed	Ex-service men and women	Migrant workers
Currently employ	66	75	68	51	15	27	41	36
Target for recruitment	23	9	10	11	5	11	15	6
Neither	24	21	27	43	81	65	49	60

Base: all HR practitioners (n=1,078)

## 2 What is the role of employers in developing employability?

*‘There is a growing emphasis on employability-based work relationships as mutually beneficial exchanges, where individuals add value to organisational performance and employers enhance workers’ long-term success in the labour market.’*

Although the assumption of an employability-based relationship is that it is voluntary and mutually beneficial, interpretations of ‘employability’ and ‘talent’ described in the previous section suggest that employers’ subjective perceptions and the needs and circumstances of a particular business play a critical role in individuals’ success in the labour market. As a result, in order to remain employable, individuals seek to enhance their ability to meet employers’ expectations, as opposed to pursuing an individualised career path.

If employers do have more power in distributing access to employment opportunities, do they also take responsibility for ensuring that individuals have opportunities to enhance their careers overall? This section considers individuals’ and employers’ perspectives on the respective responsibilities over skill and career development in a work relationship.

### **Perspectives on responsibility in an employability-based work relationship**

There is a growing emphasis on employability-based work relationships as mutually beneficial exchanges, where individuals add value to organisational performance and employers enhance workers’ long-term success in the labour market. The assumption is that employability is a viable alternative to job security, increasing an individual’s ability to move between jobs and organisations through their own marketability. However,

such a relationship can only be empowering for workers if there is a shared understanding between the employees and employers of the expectations around the mutual responsibility for development of skills and careers, and, specifically, the type of contribution that employers will be making in developing workers in their organisations as well as beyond (Clarke and Patrickson 2008; Hoffman et al 2013).

Existing evidence points at the likely differences in the stakeholders’ agendas in the expected value of employability (Sin and Neave 2016). From the point of view of the state, employability is an indicator of the chance of full employment, and, therefore, greater overall productivity. As such, it is also about the most optimal match between individual potential and the opportunities to realise that potential in work, avoiding underemployment. As a result, employability is no longer a priority only for the unemployed or disadvantaged groups, but for the entire active population (Forrier and Sels 2003).

For organisations, it represents the possibility of a more accurate matching between labour supply and demand, and gaining competitive advantage through a more flexible relationship with the workforce. Employability-based work relationships also allow employers to reduce risk by removing their obligations to provide job security, and negotiating working conditions with employees. Understandably, they may be most interested in



such individuals that are able to offer current and/or long-term value to the business. As a result, rather than promoting a two-way employment relationship, employability has the potential to shift the balance of power further towards employers, who will invest only in skills they require (Rosen et al 2013), allowing only those employees who are core to the business the power to negotiate (Sullivan and Wong 2009).

Finally, for individuals, employability is a route to greater worker agency, providing individuals with freedom and opportunities to pursue the best career development opportunities for themselves. Employable individuals no longer have to rely on one organisation for the duration of their working life (Forrier and Sels 2003; De Vos et al 2011). Yet, the evidence suggesting that employees have fully adopted the individual agency view, taking most responsibility for their career rather than relying on their employer, is limited. It may not reflect the various needs and perspectives of today's diverse workforce, especially those on the lower end of the power continuum, who are perhaps less able to define their own employment conditions (Roehling et al 2000). The CIPD's

latest *Employee Outlook* survey (CIPD 2016) illustrated a general sense of disappointment with career progression, with around a third of employees feeling it's unlikely that they'll be able to fulfil their career aspirations in their current organisation. This suggests a growing misalignment between what employees want and need to advance their careers, and what organisations are delivering.

#### Individuals' views of responsibility for career development

Among the focus group participants, there were mixed reactions as to whether individuals expect the organisation to provide opportunities for career development, or whether they see it as their own responsibility. Those in employment largely felt it was important that they pursue training and development opportunities for themselves, with a focus on continuous self-improvement, in order to stay competitive in the labour market. Unemployed groups were generally more focused on adapting to meet employers' expectations and gain employment. As such, unemployed groups also tended to feel less in control of their career paths, with the perception that development opportunities were in the hands of employers.

*'Rather than promoting a two-way employment relationship, employability has the potential to shift the balance of power further towards employers.'*

**Table 7: Agents' definitions of employability (adapted from Forrier and Sels 2003; De Vos et al 2011; Dries et al 2014; Clarke and Patrickson 2008; McQuaid and Lindsay 2005)**

Agent	Definition	Assumptions
Individuals	Indicator of career potential, based on interaction of personal characteristics and labour market forces	Rely on employers to provide opportunities to enable career development
Employers	Key to organisational agility and competitive advantage, through flexibly matching supply in job market with current business needs	As employers no longer promise job security, individuals are more independent in their own career management
State	Realisation of career and employment potential	Employability is obtained through a match in the available knowledge, skills and abilities and employers' requirements for those

**Table 8: Perceived responsibility for career development**

Group	Examples
Self-employed	<p><i>'Sometimes the employer can overlook employees who perhaps want to succeed but just don't show it for some reason. For me, it's great to keep on learning and bettering yourself.'</i></p> <p><i>'[You] have to stay competitive. This is extremely vital for self-employed people as they have to pay for their own training, rather than big organisations.'</i></p> <p><i>'I think companies often lose track of the importance of continuing to educate their staff.'</i></p>
In-demand roles	<p><i>'I think the employer should identify the best [training and development opportunities] for the employee.'</i></p>
Not-in-demand roles	<p><i>'I take part in a development scheme at work. This is partially to network but also to develop skills I might not get through my day job. It means I might be able to demonstrate something different from my peers in my next application.'</i></p> <p><i>'Line managers can flag [opportunities for training and development], but ultimately, the more senior we get, the more responsible we are for our own development.'</i></p>
Short-term unemployed	<p><i>'I know where I would like to go, but am not sure if it's feasible or affordable to get there, and at least for the short-term I will have to take whatever job I can get.'</i></p> <p><i>'I feel like I may have to take any job just to support myself, and that may lead to somewhere else, not in the direction I always had in mind for myself.'</i></p>
Long-term unemployed	<p><i>'I don't really have control. Someone else has to hire or promote you, and you can do everything in your power to make yourself more appealing, but in the end it's in someone else's hands.'</i></p> <p><i>'You don't know if you are capable of reaching your goals; you can only fulfil your potential if you're given an opportunity.'</i></p>

These findings suggest that employed people have more confidence and motivation to take responsibility for their own training and development, but see it as a shared responsibility with their employer. Individuals who are currently in work may be more accepting of the new type of employment relationship, understanding the expectation that they are more independent in their career management, while employers provide opportunities for transferable skills development. However, unemployed people do not have the same perceived control over their career development, relying on organisations to provide opportunities.

Given mixed views over the degree of control that individuals have over their employability, it is then unsurprising that, when asked about their paths to career success, respondents listed a number of external factors

influencing their ability, including employers' willingness to dispense opportunities, amount of support available from the state, and the overall state of the labour market creating demand for skills.

Unsurprisingly, the unemployed feel most impacted, partially because of their career history impacting future opportunities to secure job interviews and employment. The self-employed feel they have most control, as many are qualified, well experienced and face a demand for their services, and, given the nature of their role, have to be self-reliant in order to market their value to employers.

However, even in the employed groups the majority of respondents were focused on defining and achieving short-term goals, focusing on immediate development opportunities and networking to gain access to employment. As indicated by many, the future is

**Table 9: Factors impacting career success**

External factor	Examples
Employer policies and informal perceptions	<p><i>'Because of my age, I don't think employers will invest in me long term.'</i></p> <p><i>'In my last company, promotional opportunities were removed in the early 2000s. All line managers were replaced with university graduates.'</i></p> <p><i>'Glass ceilings, class, race, religion and politics all have a bearing [on ability to reach career goals].'</i></p> <p><i>'I think the relationship you have with your co-workers is a huge factor in getting on at work. My line manager is the one who does my appraisals and also the one who would write a reference if I were to move.'</i></p>
Support from the state	<p><i>'Due to government changes, I won't now retire next year at 60. I have to stay in the workplace until 66, so the best I think I will have is a minimum wage job, if that.'</i></p>
Macroeconomic factors	<p><i>'I thought getting more experience would give me an idea of the career paths I could take, but it's getting more confusing, and since I graduated the job market hasn't improved much.'</i></p> <p><i>'I was lucky to have that job for ten years; doubt I'll ever see that again. The job market is too vicious now and the oil and gas industry is very weak.'</i></p> <p><i>'The economic climate and the way things are or are headed in my industry [affect my ability to reach career goals].'</i></p>

too uncertain, especially for those working in a sector impacted by significant change (for example the public sector), or at the end of their career.

Finally, we asked individuals about their attitudes to training and development, and its relevance to furthering their careers. Overall, development is seen in a positive light, as adding value to skillsets and confidence. Specifically, courses offering accreditation can help workers progress in their career and lead to new opportunities. For the unemployed especially, being invested in by an employer was felt to have a positive impact, indicating that these individuals are valued in the workplace.

However, the value of the training is diminished if it's too generic, passive or made obligatory. Many felt that the value delivered by the courses was disproportionate to the amount of time, work and effort involved in making up lost work hours. Development needs often have to be signed off by senior staff, with little control in

the process left to the individual. Limited budgets and subjective views of the decision-makers about investment in development leads to missed opportunities for some. Not surprisingly, the self-employed felt the most in control of their training and development, as they have the ability to identify specific training needs and invest in those themselves.

### **Employers' views on responsibility for talent and career development**

As suggested by individual workers, employers have a lot of scope in defining and distributing development opportunities, which underpin individuals' career success. In line with that, some research has already pointed at the role of people management 'philosophy' adopted by firms (Monks et al 2013). These philosophies constitute high-level assumptions about the role of individuals in an organisation, for example, as resources utilised by a business to generate value, or recipients of value in their own right. HR philosophies are informed by business strategies,

contextual factors, as well as organisational values.

The recent focus on 'talent' as key to creating value for the business has in particular highlighted the role of such high-level assumptions in people management practices, and resulting outcomes for workers. Talent management has a focus on workforce 'segmentation', aiming to attract, retain and develop key 'talents' (Illes et al 2010). Meyers and van Woerkom (2014) described four talent management philosophies across two dimensions. On the one hand, talent management can have an exclusive or inclusive focus, depending on whether it targets a small group of 'elites' or the whole workforce. The second perspective distinguishes between a view of talent as a stable, perhaps innate, quality, or one that can be developed over time by realising individuals' potential.

While in practice the perceptions of 'talent' are unlikely to be as clear-cut, it is interesting to establish the underlying assumptions

**Table 10: Application of people management practices to different groups of employees (%) (Guest and Peccei 2001)**

	Applies to all employees	Applies to some employees based on an assessment of their potential value to the organisation	Does not apply in this organisation
Employees share the financial success of the company.	34	22	42
Employees are given a chance to develop and enhance their careers in this organisation.	63	29	7
Employees are given a chance to enhance their employability outside of our organisation.	35	29	30
Employees have an attractive future with the organisation.	43	42	12
Employees are treated fairly and equally.	75	16	7
Employees participate in workplace decisions.	35	46	18

of employers about individuals and their ‘talents’, based on their espoused values and talent management practices. In the CIPD survey, nine out of ten HR respondents initially reported that everybody has a certain talent (89%) and that everyone should be considered a talent and supported to reach their potential (87%), indicating a prevalence of inclusive philosophies of talent management.

Yet, when reflecting on the actual practices supporting partnership models between employers and workers (Guest 2002), it appeared that in three out of ten organisations, opportunities to enhance careers were available only to some workers based on the value they could offer the employer. Furthermore, four out of ten HR respondents said the same about availability of an attractive future with the organisation based on the potential value of the worker to the business. Both of these point to a transactional relationship being offered by employers.

It is also interesting to compare organisational practices with regard to internal versus external

employability enhancement. Three in ten HR respondents reported that their organisation does not provide external development opportunities, compared with only 7% of respondents saying the same about internal opportunities.

Organisations with more inclusive practices to talent management were also more likely to have specific opportunities available to staff. For example, of employers who said that the statement ‘employees are given a chance to develop and enhance their careers in this organisation’ applies to all employees, 48% provided career management training for managers and supervisors, compared with 31% of employers with more exclusive approaches (see Table 11).

In addition to understanding which groups of employees are able to access opportunities for career enhancement, we have considered the quality of the opportunities available. Kinnie and Swart (2011) have previously distinguished between two types of organisational strategies in knowledge management: one that develops knowledge specific to

the organisation and its needs, and one that follows broader industry standards with a focus on professional development.

The survey suggests that the majority of employers express a preference to manage talent according to organisation-specific standards, rather than industry-wide standards (see Table 12). This was particularly true in voluntary sector organisations that reported higher agreement with statements indicating preference of organisation-specific approaches to development.

Internally focused workplace development opportunities are likely to ensure that a particular employer realises investment in development for the organisation. Yet, the worker might not have the skills transferable to other organisations. This is in contrast with the premise of the type of ‘deal’ where enhancement of employability is the key value derived from the employment relationship by the worker. Instead, they may be receiving only the development that is relevant to their current employer, without the promise of job security.

**Table 11: Availability of specific practices based on organisation's talent management approach (%)**

	Employees are given a chance to develop and enhance their careers in this organisation		Employees have an attractive future with the organisation	
	Applies to all employees (n=676)	Applies to some employees based on an assessment of their potential value to the organisation (n=303)	Applies to all employees (n=463)	Applies to some employees based on an assessment of their potential value to the organisation (n=428)
Classes, workshops and/or seminars on managing the diverse workforce	40	23	41	31
Line manager training on equality, diversity and/or inclusion	57	37	53	49
Career management training for managers/supervisors	48	31	50	36
Career management training for junior employees	41	19	41	28
Employee personal development plans	73	54	71	64
Internal secondments/project assignments/work shadowing	54	34	53	44
Regular performance feedback and appraisal processes	83	69	81	76

Base: all HR practitioners (n=1,078)

**Table 12: Industry-specific and organisation-specific development practices (%)**

Industry-specific practices			Organisation-specific practices
We provide profession-related training and rely on formal training programmes.	34	66	We provide skills and training tailored to our organisation, for example mentoring and coaching from internal leaders.
We develop deep expertise in high-knowledge areas and promote individuals in-role with limited movement between roles and specialisms.	45	55	We have a flexible internal structure that moves talent frequently between roles and specialisms.
We prefer to recruit experts into the organisation immediately proficient in their job.	34	66	We prefer to develop future skills and knowledge within our workforce and grow talent internally.
Our jobs are structured around standardised industry specialisms.	44	56	Our jobs are broad and encourage multi-skilling, versatility and innovation.
We focus on industry standards of knowledge and procedures.	41	59	Knowledge is highly individual, flexible and based on organisation-specific processes.
We follow a league-table methodology of performance data that is linked to industry standards.	28	72	Performance data is used along with external benchmarked data which promotes alignment with organisational culture and values.

Base: all HR practitioners (n=1,078)

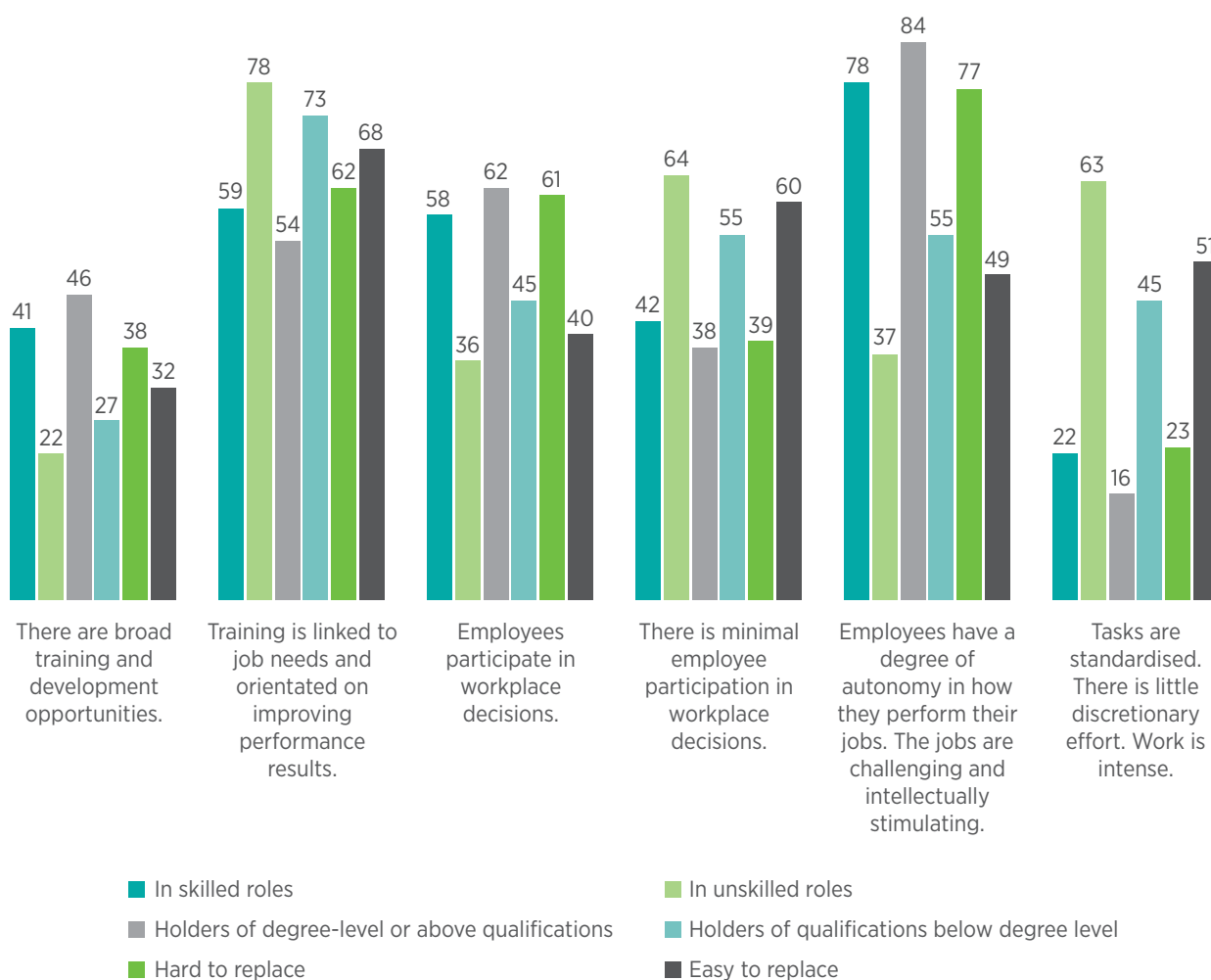
### Box 1: Job roles and access to development opportunities

In order to establish the types of roles where development opportunities become available, we asked line managers a series of questions to establish the overall profile of jobs in teams they were managing (skilled and unskilled roles), and the workers who filled those jobs (such as level of qualifications). We then compared availability of training and development opportunities and autonomy in performing tasks between teams of different profiles (see Figure 6).

Those who manage employees who are mostly in unskilled roles are much more likely to report that tasks of the teams are standardised, with 63% reporting this compared with 22% of those who manage people mostly in skilled roles. On the other hand, individuals working in skilled roles (41%) and those who mostly have degree-level qualifications (46%) are more likely to have access to broad training and development opportunities than those in unskilled roles (22%) and those without degree-level qualifications (27%).

Similarly, employee participation in workplace decisions is more likely in teams mostly made up of skilled roles (58%) and those with degrees (64%) than those teams mostly made up of unskilled roles (36%) and those without degree-level qualifications (55%). Those who manage employees who are hard to replace are much more likely to report that there is job autonomy, with 77% reporting this compared with 49% of those who manage people that are easy to replace.

Figure 6: Working practices in teams of different profiles (%)



Base: all line managers (n=1,014)

### 3 Which factors influence organisational investment in development?

Within the broad trends in individual and organisational approaches to employability, there are differences associated with organisational characteristics that explain some of the variation. This section looks at the links between talent management philosophies and employer practices, as well as compares practices across organisational contexts.

#### Organisational context and investment in employability

In the surveys of HR practitioners and line managers we asked a number of questions aimed at understanding the context of firms that the respondents worked in. HR practitioners reflected on organisational strategy, success relative to their peers and the current state of the recruitment landscape.

For instance, how a firm chooses to compete in its market appears to make a difference as to whether

it has a definition of ‘talent’. Organisations who operate on an ‘added value’ strategy (36%) were significantly more likely than those on a high-quality (15%), low-cost (18%) or customer-service strategy (20%) to have a formal definition of talent.

In turn, those with a clear definition of talent were also more likely to provide a range of support for individuals and line managers regarding talent development (see Table 13). For instance, just over half (51%) of organisations with either a formal or informal definition of talent provided career management training for managers and supervisors – and 40% for junior employees – compared with 24% and 19% of organisations without a definition for talent, respectively.

Organisations competing on added value, followed by those competing on quality, were most likely to offer a range of practices

supporting employee development, particularly line manager training on diversity and inclusion and career management, and internal secondments to staff. In contrast, those competing on low cost were least likely to have introduced these forms of support for talent management and development. Interestingly, while firms competing on customer service were nearly as likely as those competing on added value to invest in line manager training, provision of training for junior employees was lower at 29%, compared with nearly four in ten (39%) of organisations competing on added value.

There are two possible explanations for these findings. One is the overall maturity of HR processes impacting organisational investment in talent management and development. Given the association between presence of ‘talent’ definitions in organisations and a range of practices, we might conclude

**Table 13: Provision of support, by organisation’s strategy (%)**

	Definition of talent?		Competitive strategy			
	Yes	No	Low cost	Added value	High quality	Customer service
Classes, workshops and/or seminars on managing the diverse workforce	41	22	26	36	32	35
Line manager training on equality, diversity and/or inclusion	57	38	37	57	46	50
Career management training for managers/supervisors	51	24	27	44	39	44
Career management training for junior employees	40	19	12	39	35	29
Employee personal development plans	72	54	53	64	65	65
Internal secondments/project assignments/work shadowing	54	32	40	50	41	45
Regular performance feedback and appraisal processes	82	68	72	79	72	75

Base: all HR practitioners (n=1,078)

that firms that regularly have conversations about 'talent' (and, therefore, agree on what it means) are then more likely to implement training and processes to support development of staff.

The second explanation is that the choice to invest in talent management and development is affected by company strategy. While the findings do not imply causation, organisations with a

focus on added value or quality appear to rely on investment in staff careers as one of the factors contributing to performance.

Furthermore, company strategy also appeared to have an impact on how inclusive the talent approach is: only seven out of ten HR respondents in companies competing on low cost agreed that everybody has a certain talent, and 83% were prepared to support anyone in their

development ambitions. These organisations were also more selective in supporting careers of all employees in the organisation (38%), compared with other firms.

Another factor affecting investment decisions is short-term business performance. We asked HR practitioners to evaluate the growth of their organisation over the previous two years, and its performance relative to peers in the sector.

**Table 14: Attitudes to talent, by organisation strategy and performance (%)**

	Organisation strategies				Organisation performance			
	Low cost	Added value	High quality	Customer service	Growth in the past 2 years	Decline in the past 2 years	Ahead of competitors	Behind competitors
A talent is not something that everyone possesses, just the lucky few.	27	13	13	7	13	19	14	14
Everybody has a certain talent.	73	87	87	93	87	81	86	86
Only those in strategically critical jobs can be considered talent and supported to reach their potential.	17	17	9	8	13	12	13	16
Everyone should be considered a talent and supported to reach their potential, no matter what that might be.	83	84	91	92	87	88	87	84
<b>Employees are given a chance to develop and enhance their careers in this organisation.</b>								
Applies to all employees.	38	67	68	63	69	50	70	46
Applies to some employees based on an assessment of their potential value to the organisation.	48	26	28	27	28	32	25	36
Does not apply in this organisation.	12	5	4	9	3	15	4	16
<b>Employees are given a chance to enhance their employability outside of our organisation.</b>								
Applies to all employees.	19	38	39	34	38	24	42	23
Applies to some employees based on an assessment of their potential value to the organisation.	25	37	28	25	30	35	29	41
Does not apply in this organisation.	50	24	26	34	26	36	25	30
<b>Employees have an attractive future with the organisation.</b>								
Applies to all employees.	23	43	47	46	52	18	51	29
Applies to some employees based on an assessment of their potential value to the organisation.	45	49	41	38	42	42	39	37
Does not apply in this organisation.	26	7	8	12	5	30	8	27

Base: all HR practitioners (n=1,078)



Those perceiving their organisations to decline, or performing behind their peers, were less likely to say that opportunities for career development both inside and outside the organisation are available to all employees, while still opening those opportunities to some staff who were deemed to have potential value for the organisation. These findings suggest that while reducing availability of support overall, struggling organisations maintain their investment in high-value staff.

However, even though the approaches offered by firms competing on added value and quality, as well as those with greater self-reported performance,

appeared to be more inclusive, the supplied training was also more likely to be organisation-specific. In contrast, companies competing on low cost and those performing behind competitors may be less likely to invest in training, but where they do so the skills can be more easily transferred elsewhere in the industry.

### Previous talent management experiences and investment in employability

We hypothesised that organisations' previous experiences in talent management may impact their approaches. For instance, some firms investing in developing their staff, but then experiencing high turnover rates,

may become more selective in offering opportunities in the future. We asked HR practitioners about the difficulties in recruitment and retention experienced by their organisation, as well as about experiences of investing in people and managing diversity more specifically (see Table 16).

While the extent of recruitment difficulties did not appear to be associated with variation in organisational attitudes and approaches to talent, the opposite was true of retention difficulties and changes in turnover rates. Firms where retention difficulties were on decline in the previous 12 months, and where turnover rates decreased, were more likely

**Table 15: Approaches to training and skills, by company's strategy and performance (%)**

	Organisation strategies				Organisation performance			
	Low cost	Added value	High quality	Customer service	Growth in the past 2 years	Decline in the past 2 years	Ahead of competitors	Behind competitors
We provide profession-related training and rely on formal training programmes.	45	34	36	29	34	41	33	42
We provide skills and training tailored to our organisation, for example mentoring and coaching from internal leaders.	55	66	64	71	66	59	67	58
We prefer to recruit experts into the organisation immediately proficient in their job.	41	35	37	29	31	46	32	58
We prefer to develop future skills and knowledge within our workforce and grow talent internally.	59	65	63	71	69	54	68	42
Our jobs are structured around standardised industry specialisms.	51	48	43	39	43	49	42	60
Our jobs are broad and encourage multi-skilling, versatility and innovation.	49	52	57	61	58	51	58	40
We focus on industry standards of knowledge and procedures.	44	47	39	39	40	48	41	55
Knowledge is highly individual, flexible and based on organisation-specific processes.	56	53	61	61	60	52	59	45
We follow a league-table methodology of performance data that is linked to industry standards.	41	31	25	24	28	37	24	43
Performance data is used along with external benchmarked data which promotes alignment with organisational culture and values.	59	69	75	76	72	63	76	57

Base: all HR practitioners (n=1,078)

to open up career enhancement opportunities in the organisation to all employees, rather than limiting those based on assessment of workers' potential value to the organisation. While not necessarily a causal relationship, it is possible that organisations with more inclusive talent approaches are also more effective at retaining talent.

Unsurprisingly, previous experiences in talent investment and diversity management also had an effect on organisational practice (Verkerke 1998). For instance, those with mainly negative experiences of managing diversity were less likely to agree that everyone should be considered a talent

and supported to reach their potential, no matter what that might be (73%), compared with respondents reporting mostly positive experiences (88%). Those with negative experiences were also more exclusive in providing only some employees with opportunities for career enhancement, involving them in workplace decisions, and ensuring people are treated fairly and equally, or reporting that these practices do not apply in their organisations at all.

Another striking difference in the practices prevalent in organisations with mostly positive and negative experiences in investing in talent and managing diversity is their

preferences around buying skills into the organisation. Only a quarter (25%) of those with positive experiences in investing in talent and the same proportion of those with positive experiences of managing diversity (25%) agreed that they prefer to recruit experts into the organisation immediately proficient in their job, compared with six in ten of organisations with mostly negative experiences of investing in talent, and 54% of those with negative experiences of managing diversity. Large organisations were more likely to report mostly positive previous experiences of managing diversity (42%) compared with SMEs (30%), with few differences between sectors.

**Table 16: Talent approaches, by talent management experiences (%)**

	Recruitment difficulties in the previous 12 months		Retention difficulties in the previous 12 months		Turnover rates, compared with 12 months ago		Experience of investing in people		Experience of managing diversity	
	Increased	Decreased	Increased	Decreased	Increased	Decreased	More positive (for example, increased performance, commitment)	More negative experience (for example, turnover)	More positive	More negative
A talent is not something that everyone possesses, just the lucky few.	15	19	17	16	18	8	11	10	12	25
Everybody has a certain talent.	85	81	83	84	82	92	89	90	88	75
Only those in strategically critical jobs can be considered talents and supported to reach their potential.	14	23	15	22	15	10	11	13	12	27
Everyone should be considered a talent and supported to reach their potential, no matter what that might be.	86	77	86	78	85	90	89	87	88	73
<b>Employees are given a chance to develop and enhance their careers in this organisation.</b>										
Applies to all employees.	63	63	56	73	54	74	74	37	72	31
Applies to some employees based on an assessment of their potential value to the organisation.	30	25	35	21	37	18	23	48	25	48
Does not apply in this organisation.	6	11	8	6	8	8	3	14	3	21

Continued on page 25

**Table 16: Talent approaches, by talent management experiences (%) (continued)**

	Recruitment difficulties in the previous 12 months		Retention difficulties in the previous 12 months		Turnover rates, compared with 12 months ago		Experience of investing in people		Experience of managing diversity	
	Increased	Decreased	Increased	Decreased	Increased	Decreased	More positive (eg increased performance, commitment)	More negative experience (eg turnover)	More positive	More negative
<b>Employees are given a chance to enhance their employability outside of our organisation.</b>										
Applies to all employees	37	32	34	43	32	30	47	10	46	22
Applies to some employees based on an assessment of their potential value to the organisation.	29	32	32	29	34	27	26	37	31	26
Does not apply in this organisation.	28	32	30	24	30	37	22	45	18	49
<b>Employees have an attractive future with the organisation.</b>										
Applies to all employees.	42	42	33	44	35	44	54	14	51	20
Applies to some employees based on an assessment of their potential value to the organisation.	43	44	49	45	46	37	39	48	40	47
Does not apply in this organisation.	12	11	16	7	16	14	5	35	7	30
<b>Employees are treated fairly and equally.</b>										
Applies to all employees.	74	64	68	76	68	80	84	49	80	45
Applies to some employees based on an assessment of their potential value to the organisation.	18	23	18	15	18	15	12	28	15	18
Does not apply in this organisation.	8	8	13	5	13	3	3	22	4	35
<b>Employees participate in workplace decisions.</b>										
Applies to all employees.	32	34	29	43	29	25	43	15	44	19
Applies to some employees based on an assessment of their potential value to the organisation.	50	54	46	50	48	58	47	47	44	36
Does not apply in this organisation.	18	11	24	7	22	16	9	38	12	45

Base: all HR practitioners (n=1,078)

The impact of previous negative experiences on availability of career enhancement opportunities is a reason for concern, as it points at the potential subjectivity in organisational decisions to invest in talent. While these

experiences may result from poor execution of talent management practices, or are associated with a single event of mismanaging an individual worker, they can have consequences for future talent approaches. Further complications

arise from the lack of clarity over possible remedial measures to tackle decision-makers' attitudes towards talent investment and diversity.

## Organisational culture and investment in employability

A number of questions in the HR and line manager surveys asked about aspects of organisational culture, which appeared to have made a contribution to the choice of talent management approaches.

HR practitioners were asked to reflect on the extent of senior staff commitment to individuals' career development, and to

inclusive strategies, both of which appeared to make a difference for how inclusive organisational approaches to talent were. Respondents highlighting senior staff's commitment to inclusion and career development were also more likely to report organisation-specific (rather than industry-specific) approaches to development.

Interestingly, having diversity targets was not associated with

a great degree of variation in organisational approaches to talent; in fact, those who did not have the quotas were slightly more likely to agree that everyone should be considered a talent and supported to reach their potential, no matter what that might be (90% of organisations), compared with those organisations where diversity targets were present (82% of organisations). A possible explanation for this

**Table 17: Talent approaches, by talent management experiences (%)**

	Senior staff are committed to supporting individuals' career development.		Our organisation has diversity targets/quotas.		Inclusive strategies are fully supported and promoted by senior staff.	
	Agree	Disagree	Agree	Disagree	Agree	Disagree
A talent is not something that everyone possesses, just the lucky few.	11	16	16	13	11	15
Everybody has a certain talent.	89	84	84	87	89	85
Only those in strategically critical jobs can be considered talents and supported to reach their potential.	9	23	18	10	8	25
Everyone should be considered a talent and supported to reach their potential, no matter what that might be.	91	77	82	90	92	75
<b>Employees are given a chance to develop and enhance their careers in this organisation.</b>						
Applies to all employees.	76	23	66	61	75	35
Applies to some employees based on an assessment of their potential value to the organisation.	21	53	30	30	21	45
Does not apply in this organisation.	3	24	2	9	3	19
<b>Employees are given a chance to enhance their employability outside of our organisation.</b>						
Applies to all employees.	43	7	41	31	46	15
Applies to some employees based on an assessment of their potential value to the organisation.	30	25	38	26	28	28
Does not apply in this organisation.	23	62	19	38	22	54
<b>Employees have an attractive future with the organisation.</b>						
Applies to all employees.	54	11	45	41	55	17
Applies to some employees based on an assessment of their potential value to the organisation.	39	47	47	43	38	51
Does not apply in this organisation.	5	40	6	14	5	30

Base: all HR practitioners (n=1,078)

is that organisations with less inclusive cultures introduce quotas to improve practice, and are yet to see the effects of that intervention.

Finally, perceived differences in organisational culture, as reported by line managers, were associated with variation in approaches to talent and development. Those line managers who work in a dynamic, entrepreneurial and creative culture are most likely to report that employees have a degree of autonomy in how they perform their jobs, and have access to broad training and development opportunities.

**Line managers’ discretion**

In understanding organisational approaches to talent management and career development, the attitudes of the ‘gatekeeper’ to these opportunities play a

critical part. While organisational HRM policies are influential in driving practice, it often falls on line managers to make day-to-day decisions about employees’ involvement in development, and the degree of autonomy and flexibility they have in their roles. These line managers can choose to adhere to policies strictly, or view them simply as guidelines, while applying discretion in distributing opportunities to staff.

First, we asked line managers about the extent to which different stakeholders in an organisation actively ensure that all employees are given an opportunity to develop and progress their career ambitions, comparing this with the responses about inclusiveness of organisational approaches to talent management. Overall, 40% of line managers suggested that

*‘While organisational HRM policies are influential in driving practice, it often falls on line managers to make day-to-day decisions about employees’ involvement in development, and the degree of autonomy and flexibility they have in their roles.’*

**Table 18: Talent approaches in teams, by organisational culture (%)**

	An organisation with a family feel, held together by loyalty and tradition – leaders are viewed as mentors or parents.	A formalised and structured place to work, where procedures govern what people do and hold people together.	A dynamic, entrepreneurial, and creative place to work – people stick their necks out and take risks.	A result-oriented organisation whose major concern is with getting the job done. People are competitive and goal-oriented, and are held together by an emphasis on winning.
Employees have a degree of autonomy in how they perform their jobs. The jobs are challenging and intellectually stimulating. The team works together to generate ideas.	75	56	87	73
Tasks are standardised. There is little discretionary effort. Work is intense.	25%	44	13	27
There are broad training and development opportunities.	38	33	47	35
Training is linked to job needs and orientated on improving performance results.	62	67	53	65

Base: all HR practitioners (n=1,078)

*‘It appears that those working in organisations with exclusive talent management philosophies find it more difficult to ensure that all staff have access to career enhancement opportunities.’*

in their organisations everyone is supported to reach their potential, no matter what that might be, while 28% responded that only those in strategically critical jobs are given opportunities for development.

It appears that those working in organisations with exclusive talent management philosophies find it more difficult to ensure that all staff have access to career enhancement opportunities, even though managers had more positive views of themselves, compared with their colleagues, and more senior managers (see Table 19).

However, regardless of the organisational philosophy, some managers found it easier to remain inclusive in staff development. These were the respondents confident to apply discretion when managing their teams, and those who felt they would be supported even if they made a mistake in people management. Additionally, line managers with personal commitment to giving all team members a chance to develop and progress their career ambitions aimed for inclusive talent management tactics. These findings indicate how important line managers’ values and attitudes are in interpreting organisation-wide approaches to talent in their teams.

**Table 19: Regardless of whether or not your organisation has policies and practices in place, to what extent do the following groups of people ACTIVELY ENSURE that all employees are given an opportunity to develop and progress their career ambitions? (%)**

		Organisations where everyone is supported to reach their potential, no matter what that might be.	Organisations where only those in strategically critical jobs are given opportunities for development.
<b>Senior leaders</b>	A great deal	39	14
	To some extent	51	49
	Not at all	6	31
<b>Immediate manager</b>	A great deal	44	18
	To some extent	45	57
	Not at all	4	22
<b>Colleagues</b>	A great deal	40	14
	To some extent	52	64
	Not at all	5	19
<b>Yourself</b>	A great deal	56	33
	To some extent	40	55
	Not at all	3	10

Base: all line managers (n=1,014)

**Table 20: Managers' attitudes (%)**

		Regardless of whether or not your organisation has policies and practices in place, to what extent do you <b>ACTIVELY ENSURE</b> that all employees are given an opportunity to develop and progress their career ambitions?		
		<b>A great deal</b>	<b>To some extent</b>	<b>Not at all</b>
I adhere strictly to organisational rules and policies to ensure consistency in people management.	Agree	43	51	5
	Disagree	41	48	8
I'm not always sure how to interpret organisational strategy and policies when managing my team.	Agree	32	61	6
	Disagree	52	43	5
I am confident that I can successfully apply discretion in managing my team.	Agree	45	48	5
	Disagree	20	63	13
I feel I would be supported even if I made a mistake when managing people.	Agree	50	45	4
	Disagree	28	57	12
I feel it is my duty as a manager to give all team members a chance to develop and progress their career ambitions.	Agree	45	49	5
	Disagree	8	33	42
Have you generally had more positive or more negative experiences when applying discretion in the management of people?	More positive	51	45	4
	Neither	36	58	5
	More negative	27	58	13
Thinking specifically about PEOPLE MANAGEMENT, how similar or different are your views relative to senior leaders in your organisation?	Different or very different	37	54	9
	Similar or very similar	50	46	3
Thinking specifically about PEOPLE MANAGEMENT, how similar or different are your views relative to your immediate manager?	Different or very different	37	54	9
	Similar or very similar	47	48	4

Base: all line managers (n=1,014)

# Key findings and conclusions

*‘Responses of line managers provide some indication of how this ‘value’ is attributed. Those in roles requiring high levels of skills, holders of degree-level qualifications, as well as individuals whose skills were hard to replace were more likely to receive training and development opportunities and have a degree of autonomy in how they perform their jobs.’*

In the context of the shifting nature of the work relationship, this research sought to provide clarity on individuals’ and employers’ understanding of employability, and their expectations of each other. The report highlighted differences and misalignment in these perceptions and expectations across five key themes.

## **1 Understanding of employability is focused on individual characteristics rather than the context in which they become meaningful**

When defining the concepts of ‘employability’ and ‘talent’ unprompted, research participants focused on identifying individual characteristics, such as skills, attitudes and personal attributes, associated with ability to secure jobs, achieve career success or be considered to be ‘talented’. As a consequence, both employer interventions and government policy support employability primarily to target gaps in skills, confidence, work experience and addressing personal circumstances preventing people from participating in the labour market (Abela 2008).

But, such focus on individual characteristics downplays important external factors that contribute to employability, such as macroeconomic changes leading to imbalances in the supply and demand of skills. Societal problems are explained through personal failings to secure employment, rather than lack of market opportunities (Sin and Neave 2014). As a result, the onus

on resolving employability issues is being shifted on individuals, inevitably focusing them on short-term career goals.

Furthermore, looking at employability through a narrow lens also risks creating pools of untapped talent for employers, where relevant individual characteristics are difficult to measure, or on their own are a poor representation of individual potential in the workplace. This concerns particular personal characteristics and circumstances; for example, previous career history, health status and caring responsibilities, which – as evidence suggests – impact perceptions of the contribution that diverse workforce groups can make in a workplace.

It is perhaps more productive to conceptualise employability as a *process* rather than a stable set of characteristics that can guarantee employment and overall career success. There is some evidence of consideration to that perspective – both among individuals talking about ‘adaptability’ and in employers’ views on ‘talent’ as potential, pointing at the role of interaction between the various factors contributing to individuals’ employability. However, this is not a prevalent paradigm, particularly at the stage of entry and re-entry into employment. Viewing employability as a dynamic interaction between individual characteristics and external factors would require a review of effective approaches to skill development and talent management.



## 2 Employers' perceptions play a determining role in whether someone is seen as 'employable' or 'talented'

Both individuals and HR practitioners in the study highlighted the role of employers in determining whether a worker would have access to jobs, as well as development opportunities in the workplace. First, employed and unemployed individuals spoke of the need to meet employers' criteria for entering the workplace, or being 'employable'. Additionally, respondents defined overall career success as being able to manage perceptions and market themselves to employers.

Similarly, when asked about criteria for 'talent' in the workplace, employer representatives noted attributes that were specific to an organisation: relevant skills, performance (or added value) and, less often, potential. Even though only two in ten respondents said they had formally defined 'talent', a further four in ten based their definition on a perceived informal agreement on what is meant by the term in the business.

Such an organisation-led definition of employability and career success signals a clear shift in the power within the work relationship towards employers as gatekeepers to job and career enhancement opportunities, enabling them to drive the direction of employee development. Even though the idea of 'talent' was viewed by individuals more favourably, there was an understanding that the opportunity to demonstrate talent requires being able to access jobs first, which is contingent on employer-defined criteria of employability. For those with little or no work experience, as well as personal circumstances that may be interpreted as counter-indicators of 'talent', employer

perceptions may act as a significant barrier to career enhancement opportunities.

While this strategy might intend to ensure supply of necessary skills, it may also discourage individual agency in career development. For instance, while some individuals appreciated a necessary focus on continuous self-improvement, others believed that the requirements of the job market, the specific needs of employers, and availability of development opportunities were all outside of their control, thus relying on others – employers or the state – to identify and supply employability support. If not fulfilled, these expectations of employers' investment in individual development might translate to psychological contract breach, and ultimately employee disengagement and other negative consequences (Zhao et al 2007).

## 3 Provision of development opportunities largely relies on assessment of individual contribution to an organisation, and the threat of losing that contribution

Although nearly nine out of ten HR practitioners said that everyone should be considered a talent and supported to reach their potential (87%), when reporting on the actual practices supporting employee development, it appeared that in three out of ten organisations, opportunities to enhance careers were only available to some workers based on the value they could offer the employer.

Responses of line managers provide some indication of how this 'value' is attributed. Those in roles requiring high levels of skills, holders of degree-level qualifications, as well as individuals whose skills were hard to replace

were more likely to receive training and development opportunities and have a degree of autonomy in how they perform their jobs.

While such an instrumental approach to distributing opportunities by employers is understandable, it does appear to undermine the premise of an employability-based work relationship at least for some groups of workers. There is a risk that lack of access to development maintains a vicious circle for those who do not already possess the qualities that employers are demanding, but rely on support from others in order to develop those before they can gain capacity to manage their own careers.

Furthermore, people's motivation and ability to develop their skills can impact their perception of the work relationship overall. As such, there is a risk that employers' value-adding strategies contribute to negative employees' views of the quality of the deal they are getting from an organisation, where investment in their skills and abilities is transactional, and contingent on their continued ability to contribute, rather than one of mutual commitment. Trust in organisational support may be particularly undermined during times of performance difficulties, as the findings suggest that while reducing availability of support overall, struggling organisations maintain their investment in high-value staff.

## 4 A significant proportion of the development opportunities available have limited potential to contribute to individuals' careers beyond their current employment

Another finding concerned the type of development opportunities provided by employers. In our survey the majority of

*‘The majority of organisations expressed a preference for managing talent according to organisation-specific standards, supporting employees to build careers internally, but not providing opportunities to pick up skills transferable to other organisations.’*

organisations expressed a preference for managing talent according to organisation-specific standards, supporting employees to build careers internally, but not providing opportunities to pick up skills transferable to other organisations. While understandable in the context of organisational interest to invest in value-adding programmes and ensure that talented staff don't take their newly acquired skills elsewhere, this approach may limit the ability of workers to take the newly acquired skills elsewhere in the industry. In addition, there is a risk that the development proposition to employees is not sufficiently diverse to match the likely breadth of needs and aspirations of individual workers.

Interestingly, the type of workplace deal appears to differ according to organisational strategy. On the one hand, firms competing on added value, followed by those competing on quality, are more likely to hold inclusive approaches to talent management, extending development to wider groups of staff. They also report a broader range of practices supporting employee development, particularly line manager training on diversity and inclusion, and career management and internal secondments. In contrast, those competing on low cost were least likely to have introduced these forms of support for talent management and development.

At the same time, despite being more inclusive, firms competing on added value are also more likely to provide development opportunities that are organisation-specific, rather than supporting industry-level standards of skills. In contrast, broad training and development opportunities are characteristic of companies competing on low cost, those that experienced low levels

of performance in recent years, and organisations characterised by dynamic, entrepreneurial cultures. It is possible that as these firms cannot guarantee job security, they are instead offering development and career enhancement as part of the employment deal.

### **5 Change in practices requires management of ‘gatekeeper’ perceptions**

The report also highlighted the role of subjective perceptions of decision-makers, acting as ‘gatekeepers’ to employment and career development opportunities. For instance, HR practitioners with mainly negative experiences of managing diversity were less likely to agree that everyone should be considered a talent and supported to reach their potential, no matter what that might be, compared with those reporting mostly positive experiences. Similarly, line managers who felt they would be supported even if they made a mistake in people management, and those with personal commitment to giving all team members a chance to develop and progress their career ambitions, were more likely to aim for inclusive talent management tactics, regardless of the overall approach of their organisation.

These findings indicate how complex the notion of an ‘employer’ really is. Rather than being represented by a uniform set of formal organisational policies, the employer side of the work relationship is defined and implemented by a number of individuals and groups, including those responsible for setting organisational people strategies, those translating the strategies into formal workplace policies, as well as those responsible for implementing policies into practice. A growing body of research suggests that people management

practices may be at least as equally, if not more significantly, shaped by the degree of subjective value attached to them by decision-makers, compared with the underpinning evidence (Arthur et al 2016).

Accordingly, if organisational role in the work relationship and career support is to evolve, multiple agents, acting as employer representatives, are to be influenced. Changing their attitudes may involve tackling perception biases, dealing with previous negative experiences of managing diversity and individual development, and even challenging their personal values.

### Where next?

The employability model assumes that because the parties are dependent on each other for the relationship to work, they will fulfil their mutual obligations. Yet, the risks associated with the increased flexibility of the exchange might instead lead them to strategies that only serve their own short-term interests. For instance, organisations could be discouraged from investing into career development of their staff out of fear of losing their most skilled workers to competitors. Similarly, individuals dependent on employment as a source of stable income may consider job changes too risky, and so not take interest in continuous learning and development necessary to enhance their career.

Since the modern work relationship lacks explicit mutual guarantees to ensure that employers and individuals keep to their part of the deal, new models are required to help both parties signal their commitment to each other. Although not yet paving a defined path to more effective and mutually beneficial work

relationships between individuals and employers, the findings of this report raise a number of questions that will further support a productive debate on employability:

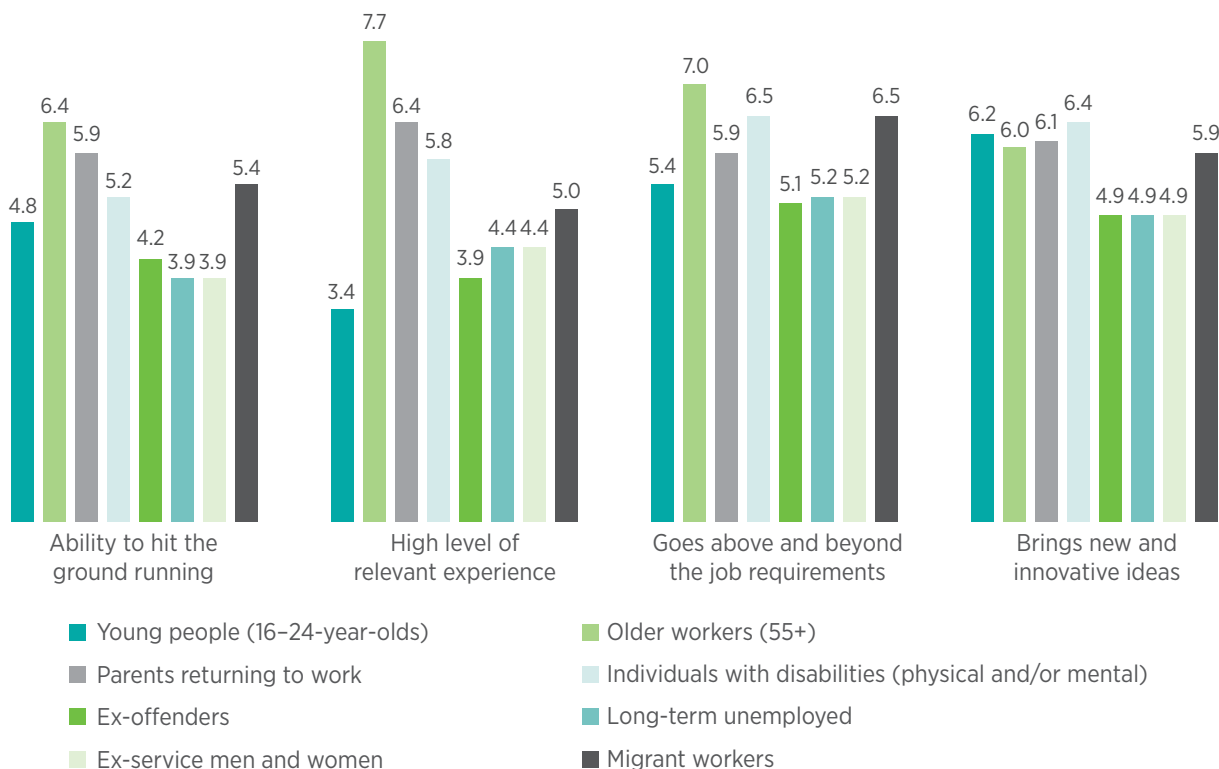
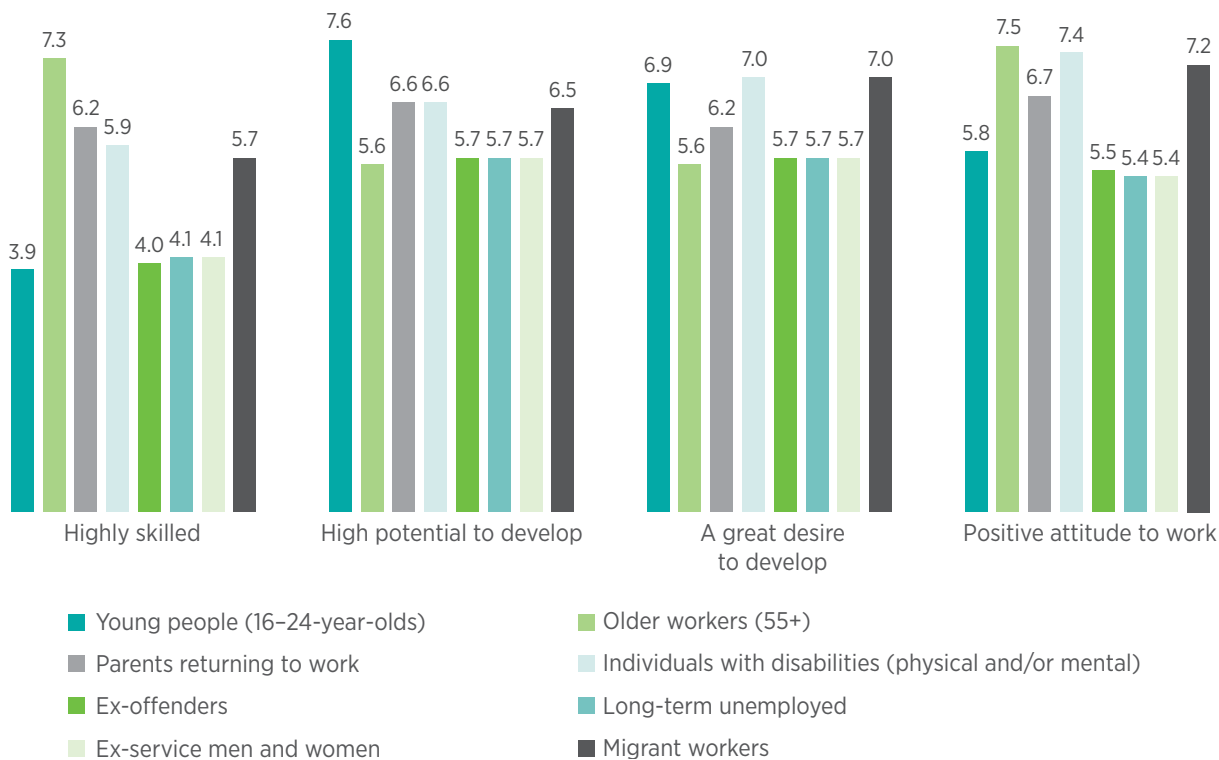
- What are the ways of conceptualising and managing employability as a long-term dynamic interaction between individuals and employers, rather than a set of characteristics associated with employment success at a given moment in time?
- How clear are individuals and employers about the criteria of employability? To what extent are individual workers aware of the critical skills and characteristics needed by employers currently and in the future? Are they interested in developing those?
- How aligned is the timeframe around development and career success, as seen by individuals and employers? How sustainable are the currently prominent timeframes? What are the drivers of employers' decisions to contribute to the employee's future career path, beyond the current organisation?
- What is the distribution of responsibility in provision of employability-enhancing opportunities between individuals, employers and other agents (the state)? Does it differ (and should it) for groups of workers with different levels of bargaining power available to them to negotiate access to opportunities? What is the role of the state in filling the gap between mismatched employability expectations of employers and individual workers?
- How transparent are individuals and employers about their mutual responsibilities in the career development within a

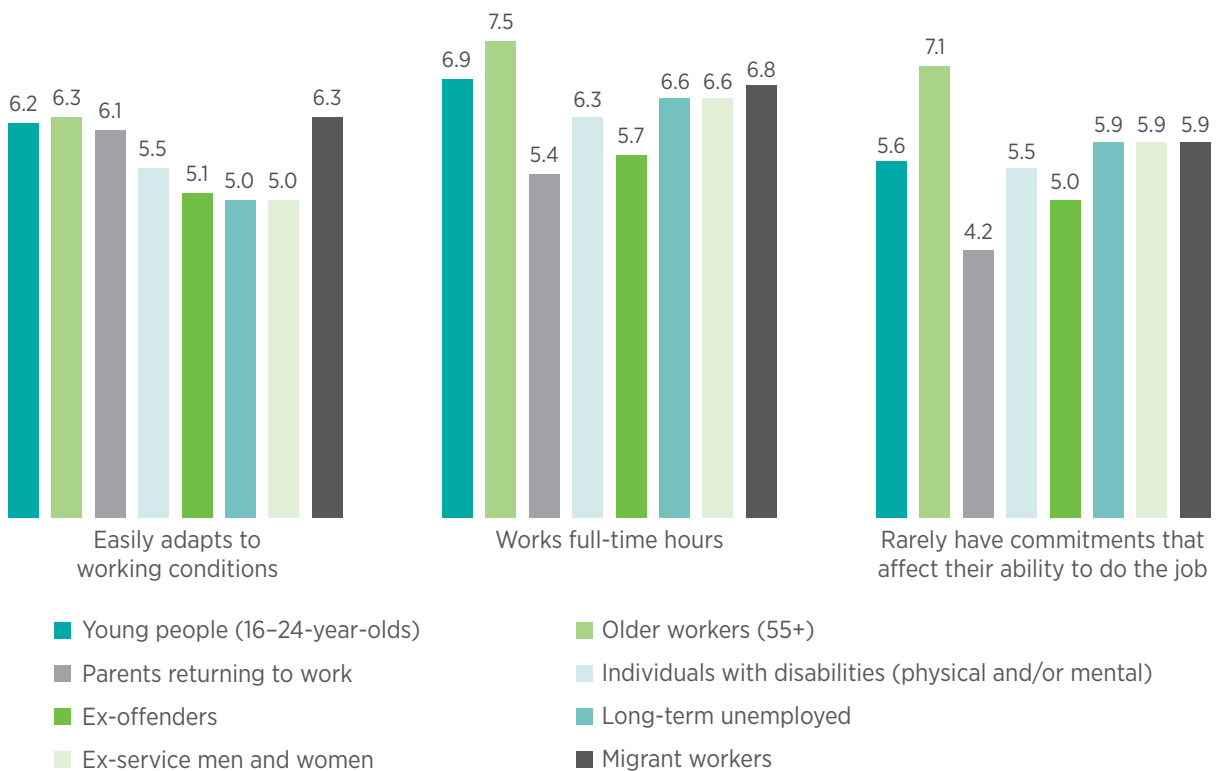
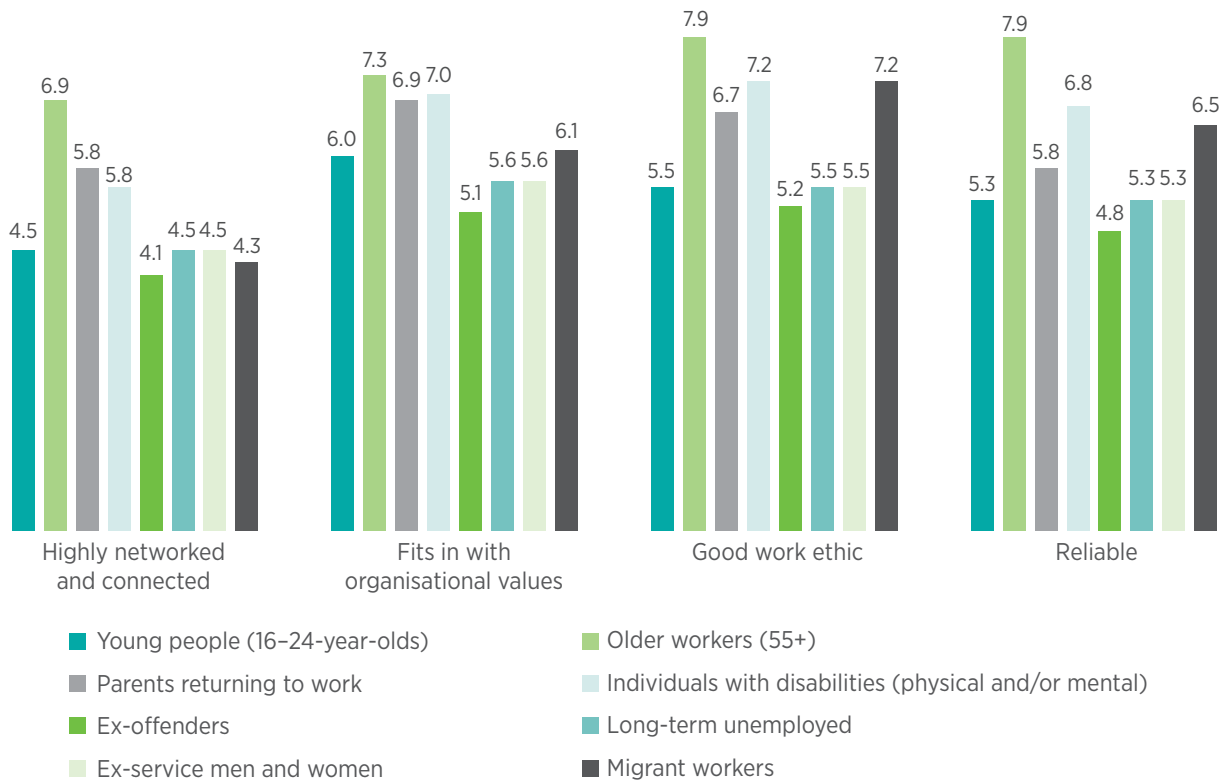
single period of employment and beyond? How conscious are they about the responsibility they are taking on?

- What underpins development of mutually beneficial work relationships? How do relationships based on marketplace-like assessment of the value exchange compare with those based on moral obligations to each other in encouraging self-serving strategies?

# Appendix: Employers' perceptions of workforce groups

Figure 7: Below are the FIVE attributes that you said best describe an employee with talent. Thinking about these attributes, how would you rate the following groups of people on a spectrum related to each attribute? Please give your response between 0 (poorly skilled) and 10 (highly skilled).





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