Development and Testing of a Comprehensive Skill Framework for the Successful Employability of MBA Graduates

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Contents

1. Introduction and background of the study

This research addresses MBA graduates' skills (intangible skills, knowledge and aptitudes) seen as "a source of competitive advantage" for the company during the recruiting process (Barney, 1991, 1995; Pfeffer, 1994, 1997). More specifically, the study focuses on the perception gap between the MBA graduates and the market regarding most important skills required and expected by employers for successful employment in the actual Japanese context. While literature a great deal of research investigates the skills required and expected by employers from MBA graduates in the U.K. and the U.S., it is less clear what skills are considered as most important for successful employment in Japan, a country with a long tradition of a lifetime employment system and less inter-firm mobility, but becoming more and more global nowadays (see Ishida, 1997).

The literature review found that there is a general understanding that higher business education's role consists of "preparing men and women for positions of managerial responsibility" (Buckley, Peach & Weitzel, 1989), providing the students with business-related knowledge and managerial skills to meet the requirements of the society. The review of

literature found that there is criticism regarding the added value of graduate business education in terms of managerial skills and competencies (Bennis & O'Toole, 2005; Mintzberg 2004 and Pfeffer & Fong, 2002). Studies done by Baruch and Leeming (2002); Baruch and Peiperl (2000) revealed several skills-list expected by employers.

Therefore, in the Japanese context of increasing globalization and under the new personnel practices (Ishida, 1997), such study would offer a better understanding of the required skills in the market and would provide added value to the business environment.

The study consists of two sections: the first section presents the development of a unique and up-to-date Comprehensive Employability Skills Framework for MBA graduates (most complete and recent skills-lists, identified through the extensive literature review) and domesticated for the challenging Japanese context, (i.e., public's interest towards MBA programs in the context of Japan's globalization (Ishida, 1997). The latter section deals in testing the perception gap on the perceived importance of the employability skills in the Japanese context between the MBA graduates and the market. For testing the hypothesis, a survey had been performed. The test results indicate high internal reliability and validity of the framework while testing the null hypothesis found that there is no significant perception gap regarding the most important skills required for a successful employability among the two groups surveyed: the MBA graduates and market (the employers of MBA graduates). In other words, the two groups surveyed share the same perception regarding the employability skills required for successful employability in the actual environment.

As studies have shown, understanding the expectations of employers in terms of skills results in successful employment of the MBA graduates. Furthermore, "retaining core employees is a critical step to achieving superior performance" McClendon (2004). The study also offers a contribution to understanding the trends within the Japanese context, and helps in creating a system that allows the best allocation of the resources meeting the employers' expectations with the needs of the individuals, therefore increasing the quality of the Japanese business context through better qualified graduates ready to successfully fit to the job requirement.

Hence, the resulting Comprehensive Employability Skills framework is expected to be a tool of important value to parties involved: MBA graduates and their employers and provides a better understanding of the skills required from MBA graduates for a successful employability in the actual Japanese context. The originality of this study is based on its unique and comprehensive conceptualization and construct of the Employability Skills Framework in a Japanese context. The literature survey did not yield any similar significant

result regarding this topic in English as far as the researcher could determine. The next section presents the related literature and is followed by the development aspects of the framework.

2. Literature review

The current section discusses the literature review that helped define the research objective and hypothesis. The following aspects are further emphasized: the Japanese context, skill sets found as essential for successful employment (Baruch & Leeming, 2001), criticisms of added value of the business schools in terms of skills (Mintzberg, 2004), followed by research questions and hypothesis.

2.1. Perception of MBA programs within a Japanese context

This subsection presents the evolution of MBA programs in Japan and the main changes that influenced the perception of the importance of MBAs. Research done by Okazaki-Ward (1993) and Ishida (1997) found that, until the late 1980s, the demand for MBAs was low due to the unique characteristics of the Japanese business context, such as: the "lifetime employment", seniority-based promotion system, little inter-firm mobility and internal "management schools" owned by companies. However, by the second half of the 1980s, it was noticed that there was an increased interest of large companies and individuals towards MBAs. A survey carried out by Hosei University (1996), revealed that among the main reasons for following an MBA program, was the understanding that it was their individual responsibility to gain the required skills to secure a job or to start their own business, since the "life-time employment" was no longer a solution. Ishida (1997) states the reasons for the increased interest in postgraduate education, by the middle of the 1990s:

* Changes in personnel practices generated by the frustration of the MBA graduates without any fast track of promotion, who were often "head-hunted by foreign firms operating in Japan" (Nihon Keizai Shinbun, 1992, 21 May).

* Structural and economic changes that proved the "life-time employment" system's weaknesses and the need of increased flexibility in managerial decisions.

* Globalization; the 1995 Japan-U.S. agreement on financial services deregulation (Watanabe, 1999) was followed by intense trade and relations between Japan and the U. S. and a strong need of skills in terms of languages abilities, cultural awareness and

international perspective.

According to Kagono (1996), a survey of Kobe University (1996) found that Japanese companies preferred an American MBA to a domestic one due to the following benefits in terms of skills: improved language ability, improved international awareness, and understanding of local society and culture. Presently, due to the increased Japanese economy's international relations, there are governmental recommendations that the education system adjust in order to effectively operate in the "global knowledge-based economy". The recent government reports, Educational Reform for the 21st Century (2001) and Action Plan to Cultivate Japanese with English Abilities (2003), discuss the importance of international awareness and global managerial strategies for Japan's economic success, as well as the education role in supporting this objective.

To conclude, it can be said from the above findings, that within the Japanese context, the changes in the job market as well as in the opportunities for self-training and education, made employees consider an MBA education in order to secure their professional career, gaining the most sought-for skills. For this objective to be accomplished there should be a clear understanding of the skills required by employers in the actual Japanese business context.

2.2. Skill sets for general employment and for business graduates' employment

The review of the literature provided large lists of skill sets believed as essential in the graduate's employment process, covering both the required skills for general employment, as well as specific skills for business graduates. Several research findings (Harvey et al., 1997; Yorke, 2004; Brennan et al., 2001, etc.) concluded that some skills sets' components are overlapping, suggesting that the employability is seen as a set of achievements, understandings, and personal attributes that make individuals more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen occupations.

As far as the required skills for business graduates are concerned, Baruch and colleagues have studied the perceived value of an MBA program over employability chances. Baruch and Leeming (2001) developed a list of skills which MBA graduates consider important for their future career. The initial list was completed with others skills perceived as significant by the respondents in another study (Baruch and Peiperl, 2000) and the most up-dated list served as a starting point for developing the present framework. Furthermore, research done by Katz (1974), Stewart (1967), Mintzberg (1973), Penley, Alexander, Jernigan, and Henwood (1991), Carroll and Gillen (1987) support the idea that, over time, the communication skills and work habits gained more importance in managerial work.

For the purpose of the current study, the skills identified through the literature review had been aggregated and integrated in the framework, after careful examination of overlapping in terms of meaning and significance. For a better understanding of the approaches and enriching the list of skills, an important reference consisted in studies as: Tanyel, Mitchell and McAlum (1999), Davison, Brown and Davison (1993), Raymond, McNabb and Matthaei (1993), Theeke, Sprague and Como (1993), Aiken, Martin and Paolillo (1994), Cook and Finch (1994), Verville (1995), Scheetz (1995), Levenburg (1996), Kryder (1997), Thornburg (1997), and Messmer (1997). The literature stated above offered solid ground to develop the comprehensive framework integrating the most recent skills set and employability models.

2.4. Criticism of the added-value of the MBA programs

The literature review found that there is criticism regarding the added value of graduate business education in terms of managerial skills and competencies. Bennis and O'Toole (2005), Mintzberg (2004), and Pfeffer and Fong (2002), investigate the gap between theory and practice, arguing that the knowledge and skills delivered by the MBA programs relate poorly to practitioners' needs. In these conditions, in the Japanese context of increasing globalization and under the new personnel practices, understanding the latest requirements of the employers in terms of skills would provide the qualification that might just make the difference to the individuals and would help them to increase their employability.

2.5 Research question and hypothesis

According to the discussion on the extant literature on the employability skills for MBA graduates and the Japanese context, it is interesting to investigate the question: *what are the most important employability skills that an MBA graduate needs in order to get employment in a position of general management in the general business context in Japan? and whether there is any perception gap between the MBA graduates and the market?*

The latter part of the question above is the main research question addressed in this study and can be stated as a (null) hypothesis as follows:

H_0; there is no perception gap between the MBA graduates and the market on employability skills perceived as important for a successful employability.

The testing of the above hypothesis by way of a survey questionnaire and interviews is elaborated in the next section.

3. Research objectives and methodology

This section includes the creation of the framework and its domestication for the Japanese context, as well as the testing of the hypothesis via a survey.

The main purpose of this study is to conceptualize and develop the Comprehensive Employability Skill Framework and to test it in verifying the existence of any perception gap regarding the most important skills for a successful employability between the groups surveyed: MBA graduates and the market. Hence, the objectives of this study are to:

a. Perform a comprehensive literature review to explore, critically evaluate and clarify theories and models related to the constructs of employability models, skill sets required from employers from MBA graduates and other related perspectives.

b. Develop and conceptualize the construction of a Comprehensive Employability Framework for the MBA graduates integrating the most recent and updated employability models and skills list.

c. Domesticate and test the conceptually constructed Framework for the MBA graduates in the Japanese context by way of sessions of discussions and brainstorming with professionals involved in MBA graduates' employability.

d. Test the hypothesis via survey investigating the perception gap between MBA graduates and employers of MBA graduates regarding the most important skills required for a successful employability.

The above-mentioned steps will be discussed in the next sections: Section 4 discusses the conceptualization of the framework and under Section 5 aspects of streamlining and testing and results of the hypothesis testing will be presented.

4. Conceptualization of the Comprehensive Employability Skill Framework

This section discusses the conceptualization process, providing the literature review, which leads to the proposed Comprehensive Employability Skill Framework. The next subsection discusses the integrated recognized employability models.

4.1. Integrated employability models

This section elaborates the creation of the proposed framework, focusing on the recognized employability models and other related constructs that contributed to the conceptualization.

The CareerEDGE Model Key to Employability proposed by Dacre Pool & Sewell (2007) was selected to be used as a basis of the framework, since it was found as the most up-to-date and it includes the relevant dimensions discussed in the literature and several of the most recognized employability models as DOTS (1977), USEM (2003) and the Model of Bennett, Dunne & Carré (1999), etc. The Emotional Intelligence Model's dimensions developed by Hay Group were also incorporated due to the increased importance the Emotional Intelligence gained in the terms of employability and career (Goleman, 1998).

The CareerEDGE model's dimensions were augmented with the respective employability skills perceived as important for MBA graduates determined from the literature (e.g., Katz, 1974; Baruch, 2001, etc.). The complete assimilation of these skills, determined through literature review with careful examination of the overlapping of their meaning would serve as a unique model related to the Japanese context.

Since the review of the literature found that due to the globalization and internalization of the Japanese business environment the relevance of the foreign languages skills increased. (Ishida, 1997), it would be interesting to explore the importance allocated to the foreign language skills for successful employability in the actual context. In Japan, as a non-English speaking country, whether a manager possesses foreign language ability is becoming vital for international business. As Walters (1990) found, when recruiting in non-English speaking countries, foreign language ability is evaluated. In the globalization context, Japanese enterprises need competitive advantages. This fact was acknowledged by the Japanese government report, "Action Plan to Cultivate Japanese with English Abilities" (2003) that discusses the importance of international awareness in terms of management strategies for Japan's economic success. In business, although English is predominantly used, other languages (Chinese, Spanish, etc.) are emerging. As no study has clearly pointed out the importance of foreign language skills in the Japanese context, the current study is not limited to a particular language, and it refers to any language (other than Japanese) used in the business context.

Furthermore, since the literature review indicated a considerable importance given not only to the language skills but also to a cultural understanding and international perspective, strongly required in international operations, in the present study, both aspects were

considered and aggregated. The first aspect refers to the foreign language ability (reading, writing and speaking), as suggested by Tanyel et al. (1999). The second aspect (discussed by Waner, 1995) involves a certain degree of multi-cultural awareness and international experience required in the business context due to such aspects as cultural differences, intercultural communication in international management, "political correctness" and business ethics. Furthermore, studies such as those done by Moon and Wooliams (1996) suggest that knowledge in relation to business ethics is culturally specific, and solid international business education has positively affected firms' performance (Beamish, 1988; Koh, 1986; Reynolds, 1986). Beamish and Calof (1989) found as important in international business: *experience, specific functional expertise, communication skills, leadership, inter-personal skills, flexibility, ethical and moral views, management skills, diversified capabilities and adaptability.* The summary of the findings based on the literature helped contribute to the "communicative portrait of a business competitive professional" presented in the last part of the framework.

4.2 The Comprehensive employability framework

This subsection discusses the conceptualization of the proposed Comprehensive Employability Skills Framework and succeeding section 5 elaborates the streamlining and testing of the framework. It commences through defining and delimitating the key terms used within this study, followed by the conceptualization and domestication process.

4.2.1 Demarcation of key terms

This section briefly indicates the definitions of the key terms and the delimitations that are used in the proposed framework. Since the related literature is abundant in definitions and perspectives on the different aspects of the employability, a clarification of meaning of the key terms used for the current study was therefore required.

a.) Employability is having a set of skills, knowledge, understanding and personal attributes that make a person more likely to choose and secure occupations in which they can be satisfied and successful. (Dacre & Sewell, 2007).

b.) Employability skills cover and identify a wide range of profession-specific skill (the so called "hard" skills - managerial work specific skills, as well as generic / transferable skills (e.g., team working, communication, leadership, etc.).

c.) Employment positions targeted included entry level (junior) management positions for general management and the general business context in Japan.

Based on the related literature, Exhibit 1 provides the definitions for CareerEDGE Employability Model's components, as described by Dacre and Sewell (2007). These dimensions were used as a basis for the framework created. An additional dimension was created regarding the foreign language skills as a particular aspect of the study.

Exhibit 1: CareerEDGE Employability Model dimensions (Dacre & Sewell, 2007)

- *Degree subject knowledge, understanding and skills* refer to the degree qualification and it is the central concept since the grading system is mainly considered by employers in graduate's evaluation. As the authors suggested, although it plays a central role, it is obvious that in many cases, only the grading report is unlikely to secure a graduate occupation in which they can be satisfied and successful.

- *Generic skills* represent the skills which can potentially be transferred to a range of contexts (Bennett et al., 1999), (e.g., Imagination/creativity; Adaptability/flexibility; Willingness to learn; Team working; etc.). Harvey et al., (1997) suggest that employers prefer graduates with well developed generic skills in different areas.

- *Emotional intelligence* is "the capacity for recognizing our own feelings and those of others, for motivating ourselves, and for managing emotions well in ourselves and in our relationships" Goleman (1998). As Dacre & Sewell (2007) suggested, the inclusion of emotional intelligence in any model of employability is strongly supported by Goleman (1998): "In a time with no guarantees of job security, when the very concept of a "job" is rapidly being replaced by 'portable skills', these are prime qualities that make and keep us employable." Research has shown that people with high levels of emotional intelligence motivate themselves and others to achieve more. They also enjoy more career success, build stronger personal relationships and enjoy better health than those with low levels of emotional intelligence (Cooper, 1997). For the present study, the Emotional Intelligence Framework refined and scaled together with Daniel Goleman, Richard Boyatzis and the Hay Group Organization was considered.

- *Career Development Learning*; as proposed by authors, this dimension includes skills referring to abilities to identify opportunities in the job market, to evaluate their potential, to present themselves effectively to prospective employers, and how to make considered decisions about their careers.

- *Experience-work and life*; Previous research (Harvey et al., 1997) reveals that graduate's prior work and life experience is greatly valued by employers. The former "life-time employment system" that was a characteristic of the Japanese context did not stimulate the development of generic "soft" skills and career management skills. From this point of view, it would be interesting to explore the importance allocated to skills gained through Work & Life Experience in the Japanese context.

- *Self-efficacy, self-confidence* and *self-esteem* provide a crucial link between knowledge, understanding, skills, experience and personal attributes and employability, since *"efficacy beliefs* influence how people think, feel, motivate themselves and act" Bandura (1995). According to Goleman (1998), people with *self-confidence* are able to present themselves with self-assurance and have "presence". Dacre and Sewell (2007) support the inclusion of self-esteem in the model citing Lawrence (1996) who indicates that the level of achievement is influenced by how the people feel about themselves; this finding is supported by research showing a positive correlation between self-esteem and achievement. It is suggested that increased self-esteem is a major part of the key to employability, since "People with global self-esteem have self-respect and a feeling of worthiness but are realistic in their evaluations of themselves" Owens (1993).

- *Reflection and evaluation* refer to opportunities for reflection on and evaluation of the learning experiences and have a crucial role in the context of employability since they help students to give full consideration on their progress and future actions (Moon, 2004).

- *Foreign Language Skills*; In this study, it refers to any language (other than Japanese) used in the context of business in the organization. The dimension also includes the cultural aspects due to the natural and intrinsic link between language and culture (such as the set of specific beliefs, way of thinking, acting and reacting of a certain country, region, etc.).
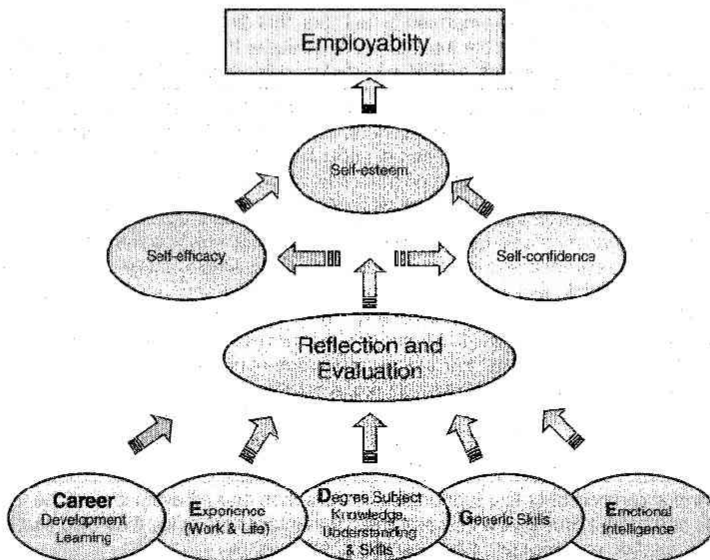
Source: Dacre and Sewell (2007).

The next section explains the conceptualization of the proposed framework utilizing these key definitions.

4.2.2 Conceptualization of the Comprehensive Employability Skill Framework

The literature review determined several recognized employability models such as DOTS Model proposed by Law and Watts (1977), Hillage and Pollard's model (1998); Bennett, Dunne and Carré (1999); USEM model (2003), as well as numerous skill sets required for both general employment and for business graduates. For the purpose of the current study, the CareerEDGE Model - a Key to Employability- proposed by Dacre and Sewell (2007) was selected for use as a basis of the framework, since it was found as the most up-to-date. It includes the relevant dimensions discussed in the literature and several of the most recognized employability models and perspectives on employability such as DOTS (1977), USEM (2003) and the Model of Bennett, Dunne & Carré (1999), etc.).The CareerEDGE model is found as the most complete and recent, offering a broad perspective on employability. The components of the model (explained in section 4.2.1) are depicted in Figure 1 and reflect a certain degree of interaction and relations among the components.

Figure 1: The essential components of graduate employability

Source: Dacre and Sewell (2007)

As indicated by the original model in Figure 1, there is a certain degree of overlapping

and interaction. The authors of the model suggest that possessing some certain categories of skills (*Career Development Learning, Experience Degree Subject Skills, Generic Skills* and *Emotional Intelligence*) a graduate involved in a personal *Reflection and Evaluation* process, would increase his *Self-Confidence, Self-Esteem and Self-Efficacy* which would lead to increased prospects of successful employability.

Since the model incorporates all the relevant dimensions and perspectives regarding the employability, the Career EDGE Model was used as a basis for the conceptualization of the framework. The dimensions were further augmented with the respective skill sets identified through intensive literature survey (e.g., Katz, 1974; Baruch, 2001; Harvey, 1997; Tanyel at al., 1999; Davidson at al., 1993, etc., see Section 2.3). Figure 2 depicts the overall structure of the Comprehensive Employability Skills Framework proposed which is the result of summarizing and synthesizing the findings of the performed comprehensive literature survey.

Figure 2: The synthesis and structure of the proposed Comprehensive Employability Skills Framework
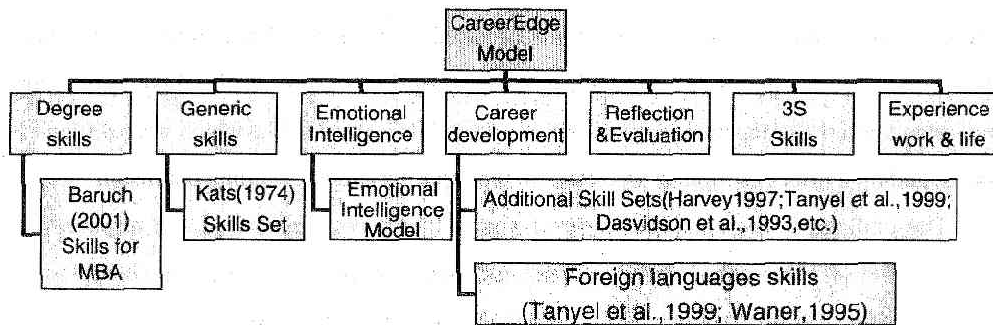
Source: Created by author through comprehensive literature review

Based on the intensive literature review and following the structure presented above, the first final elaborate version of the proposed Comprehensive Employability Skills Framework was created. Before using the framework as an instrument in testing the hypothesis in the Japanese context, domestication was therefore required. The following paragraphs discuss the domestication of the framework and the adjustments.

4.2.3 Domestication of Employability Skills framework for the Japanese context

As indicated above, the Comprehensive Employability Skills Framework was developed

incorporating the most recent and up-to date skill lists.

In order to ensure a higher reliability and credibility for the Japanese context, a preliminary domestication of the English version was performed. The process helped getting a better understanding of the meaning and perception on each skill's importance in terms of employability in the Japanese business context. For this purpose, several sessions of discussions and brainstorming with native Japanese (with strong command over the English language) involved in Japanese MBA programs (graduates, professors of MBA programs and professional recruiters operating in the Japanese market) gave valuable insights over the understanding of the skills within the Japanese context and helped in adjusting the framework according to the general perception. The semi-structured discussions and brainstorming discussions analyzed the meaning of the English description of the skills and their appropriate correspondent perception from a Japanese respondent's perspective. The graduates and faculty were asked to explain their perception of the skills and to help adjust the preliminary list so that it matches the Japanese perception. The recruiters (2 persons) were asked to describe and comment on the new requirements in terms of skills required for employment in management general business positions of MBA graduates and to explain the general market tendency and recent trends. The comments received were included and amendments made until a maximum consensus regarding the perception of the skills' description and understanding for the Japanese context was reached. For several skills, which were difficult to assess, adding a brief description was suggested as appropriate for avoiding confusion.

The findings of the comprehensive survey of literature summarized and organized as shown in Figure 1 and adjusted through the domestication process presented above lead to the Comprehensive Employability Skills Framework presented in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Proposed Comprehensive Employability Skills Framework

Degree subject knowledge	
Oral business communication skills	Business awareness/industry knowledge
Written business communication	Enterprise and entrepreneurship spirit
Financial skills / numeracy	Negotiating skills
Accounting skills	
Generic skills	
Analytical skills	Team working skills/Interpersonal skills
Communication skills/ Listening skills/ Presentation skills	Leadership /Initiative/Coaching skills
Conflict management	Negotiation/Persuasion
Coordination and Organizing skills	Personal skills/personal management/attitude (optimism, energy)
Customer Orientation/ Marketing skills	Stress Management
Decision making skills/Taking responsibility	Technical skills (ability to use new technologies)
Independence/Autonomy	Motivation and Energy
Innovation/Creativity	Planning skills
Emotional Intelligence	
Emotional Self Awareness: the ability to recognize your own emotions and their effects.	
Accurate Self- Assessment: knowing your strengths, skills and limits	
Emotional Self- Control: ability to keep your impulsive feelings and emotions under control.	
Work experience	
Training potential	Conscientiousness
Applicable prior work experience	Adaptability
Career construction	
Career management	Building and applying competencies.
Interviewing	Quick learner
Achievement Orientation	Willingness to learn all the aspects of the business
Professional grooming	
Reflection and Evaluation	
Personal construction/self-understanding	Open to feedback
Analytical ability	Multicultural appreciation /global awareness
Willingness to learn attitude (from one's mistakes)	
3S- Self-efficacy, self-confidence, self-esteem	
Responsibly executing commitments and following through	Dependability
Service Orientation	Ethical behaviour
Trustworthiness (Honesty/integrity, reliability)	Self confidence
Foreign language skills and international perspective	
Explicit and concise writing skills	
Can read rapidly, understand and edit effectively business correspondence	
Ability to explain problem, complex ideas, that others can visualize	
Ability to understand and translate jargon into meaningful terms	
Professional telephoning skills	
Ability to compliment and criticize in business communication.	
Ability to "read between the lines" in a business meeting, in the context of the cultural differences.	
International business experience.	

Source: Author

Next, Section 5 elaborates the streamlining, adjusting, and testing of the framework that is conceptualized in this section and further tests the related hypothesis that is established.

5. Streamlining, Adjusting & Testing the Framework and Hypothesis

This section discusses the streamlining, adjusting and testing of the conceptually developed Comprehensive Employability Skills Framework in the preceding Section 4. The development of the Japanese version of the framework questionnaire, the survey details, validity and reliability results and testing of the hypothesis are presented in this section.

5.1 Development of the Japanese Version of the Framework and the Questionnaire

This section presents the details of the methodology's steps: the creation of the questionnaire, the survey's procedures and sample, as well as the statistical techniques used to analyze the data.

The creation of the questionnaire

The research was conducted utilizing a self administered questionnaire (in both English and Japanese), involving graduates of Waseda University WBS/ MBA and employers of the MBA graduates, during April 2009 to May 2009 (1.5 months) and signifies a snapshot of one moment in time over the perceived importance of employability skills required from MBA graduates in order to get employment in a general business position, in the Japanese context.

The purpose of the study is to determine the existence of any perception gap regarding employability skills in the context of WBS / MBA graduate employability, testing the hypothesis, indicated in Section 2.5

Structure of the questionnaire:

The structure of the questionnaire is related to the fundamental research question: *What are the most important employability skills a WBS / MBA graduate needs in order to get employment in a position of general management in the general business context in Japan?* The questionnaire consists of the Comprehensive skills model created (see 3.1 above) and it has a solid ground since it is based on an intensive literature review, incorporating recognized

models and theories. The uniqueness derives from the fact that the model would be tested in the Japanese business context. The body of the questionnaire consists of a list of skills grouped according to the Comprehensive Employability Skill Framework and the Likert scale ranged from 1-7 (where 1= extremely important, and 7= less important).

Pilot testing and translation:

A pilot test was performed (involving four MBA graduates) and amendments had been made before the general administration of the survey instrument. A far as the translation is concerned, the English version was revised to suit the Japanese context according to the comments received and translated into the Japanese language by several MBA graduates proficient in English. The accuracy of the Japanese translation was checked using the *back-translation method* (Brislin, 1970). The final and verified version of the pilot tested questionnaire, designed in a user friendly manner and providing a brief description of the skills, was used to gather actual data essential for the study.

Reliability of the questionnaire:

As far as the *reliability of the questionnaire* is concerned, a number of steps had been taken to ensure both the internal and external reliability.

a). Internal Reliability: The reliability of multiple item scales used in this study was tested by means of the Cronbach Alpha coefficient. A value of 0.7 or higher was used as an indication that the items in a specific scale were homogenous, therefore reflecting the same construct. The Cronbach Alpha values found for each dimension are given in Table 4 under Section 6.1 and it can be noticed that there are high values for the majority of the dimensions, therefore, the framework has high internal reliability and consistency.

b). External Validity: Since the framework is based on recognized and already tested skills models determined through a literature survey and it was constructed following the most comprehensive and recent employability model (CareerEDGE, 2007), the external validity has already been established.

Sample details [1]:

The sample consisted of twenty-four participants belonging to two groups of stakeholders, involved in the Waseda WBS / MBA context (Profile: Waseda MBA graduates [14 respondents] and business recruiters for general management [11 respondents]). For the purpose of this study the convenient non-probability sampling method was used to obtain the

desired sample, due to time constraints and cultural barriers. The target population was selected within the Waseda WBS / MBA program, and employers of WBS / MBA graduates were contacted to find the desired participants, in order to ensure a higher percent of feedback and fewer errors due to misunderstandings about how to fill out the questionnaire. In the current study the employers' perceptions on the skills is proxied by recruiters. The recruiters are considered that representing the employers' perceptions and requirements in terms of skills for employment, due to the intrinsic nature of their jobs.

Since the purpose of this study consist in the development of the Employability Skill Framework for MBA graduates, the reliability and validity of the framework is the main focus. As Table 3 shows, although the sample size is not large, the Alpha values as indicators of reliability are high for the majority of the scales, indicating high internal reliability. Therefore, the sample size is perceived as adequate for this purpose.

Statistical techniques used to analyze the data:

In this study, the main analysis was through the testing of hypotheses. Statistical analysis was performed using the statistical software SPSS version 17.0 for Windows (SPSS, 2009), appropriate descriptive statistics were reported and *t*-tests were used to test the hypothesis. The methods used, corresponding to each analysis objective together with the outcome interpretation are explained in the following table:

Table 2: Analysis objective, method used and outcome interpretation

Analysis objective	Method used	Outcome interpretation
1. Establishing the variation and reliability of skills scales.	Standard deviation and Cronbach Alpha.	Higher standard deviations will indicate better variation of skill scales. Similarly, higher Alpha will indicate better reliability of skill scale.
2. Ranking of skills according to their perceived importance by the 2 groups of respondents	Ranking of the respective arithmetical mean for each selected group	The result will show which skills are perceived as higher importance by the 2 groups of respondents.
3. Assessment of the existence of any perceptual gap between the skills categories and individual skill considered of higher importance by respondents' group.	Comparison of the means of the groups by performing Student' *t*-test.	Establish whether there is a significant statistical difference between the 2 groups.

The next section discusses the findings of the analysis, as described in Table 2 above.

6. Discussions of the findings

In this section the results of data analysis will be discussed. This includes the reliability, descriptive statistics and finally the outcome of the hypotheses testing.

6.1. Reliability of the questionnaire:

As far as *the reliability of the questionnaire* is concerned, a number of steps had been taken to ensure both the internal and external reliability.

Internal reliability: The reliability of multiple-item scales used in this study was tested by means of the Cronbach Alpha coefficient. The Cronbach Alpha values found for each dimension are indicated in Table 3 below.

Table 3: Reliability of the Scales

Reliability of the Scales	Cronbach's Alpha	Items per scale
Degree of Subject Knowledge	.608	7
Generic Skills	.885	16
Emotional Intelligence	.704	3
Work Experience	.569	4
Career Development	.741	7
Reflection and Evaluation	.743	5
3S Skill	.828	6
Foreign Language Skills	.919	8

It can be noted that there are higher values for the majority of the dimensions (*Generic Skills* (.88), *Emotional Intelligence* (.70), *Reflection and Evaluation* (.74), 3S skills (.82) *Foreign Language Skills* (.91)). The lowest value is obtained for *Work Experience* (.56). The low value can be explained considering the following aspect: *Work Experience* dimension includes different various aspects strongly connected to Work Experience notion. Since in Japan, the notion of applicable "work experience" was not considered traditionally as a necessity in getting an employment (due to life-time employment system), the elements (training potential, prior applicable work experience) are perceived as separate activities, not necessary correlated. The *External Validity* has been established already since the skills sets as well as

the most recent recognized models incorporated in the framework were determined through an intensive literature survey. The following paragraphs will discuss the result of ranking of the respective arithmetical means for each selected group.

6.2. Ranking of Skills according to their perceived importance by the respondents

This section contains the ranking of the skills (i.e. by way of arithmetical mean) for each selected group based on skill categories and individual skills.

6.2.a). Ranking for the skill categories

Table 4 represents the ranking of the arithmetical means of the recruiters group (based on the *skill categories*).

Table 4: Ranking of the arithmetical means of Recruiters group

Skills Categories	N	Minimum	Maximum	Sum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Generic Skills Total	11	69.00	104.00	854.00	86,7273	12.61024
Foreign Language Total	11	31.00	49.00	438.00	39.8182	6.70549
Career Development Total	11	32.00	43.00	414.00	37.6364	4.10543
3 Skills Total	9	25.00	40.00	321.00	35.6667	4.76970
Subject Knowledge Total	11	27.00	43.00	391.00	35.5455	5.90531
Reflection & Evaluation Total	10	22.00	34.00	293.00	29.3000	3.88873
Work Experience Total	11	17.00	25.00	231.00	21.0000	2.75681
Emotional Intelligence Total	11	12.00	20.00	183.00	16.6364	2.57964

Table 5 presents the ranking of the arithmetic means as far as the graduates' group is concerned.

Table 5: Ranking of the arithmetical means of graduates' group

Skills Categories	N	Minimum	Maximum	Sum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Generic Skills Total	14	66.00	104.00	1229.00	87.7857	12.59535
Foreign Language Total	14	8.00	52.00	548.00	39.1429	11.57489
Career Development Total	14	29.00	43.00	524.00	37.4286	4.60291
Subject Knowledge Total	14	27.00	39.00	488.00	34.8571	3.52698
3 Skills Total	14	25.00	42.00	481.00	34.3571	5.18292
Reflection & Evaluation Total	14	22.00	35.00	417.00	29.7857	3.68320
Work Experience Total	14	18.00	27.00	314.00	22.4286	2.73761
Emotional Intelligence Total	14	13.00	21.00	241.00	17.2143	2.57737

The ranking of the perceived importance allocated to the skill categories is overall the same, for the two groups of respondents. This led to the conclusion that in the WBS / MBA particular context the graduates and the employers share the same perception on the importance of the employability skills categories.

The ranking of Top 5 most important skills

An additional analysis of the ranking of the Top 5 most important skills perceived by each group has been performed. The following charts show the first five most important skills from each group's point of view.

Table 6: Ranking of the Top 5 Employability Skills from the recruiters' point of view

Top 5 Employability Skills	Mean	Minimum	Maximum	Sum
Willingness to learn all the aspects of the business	6.27	5	7	69
Responsibly executing commitments and following through	6.11	4	7	55
Multicultural appreciation /global awareness	6.10	5	7	61
Motivation and Energy	6.00	4	7	66
Analytical ability	5.91	5	7	65

Table 7: Ranking of the Top 5 Employability Skills from the graduates' point of view

Top 5 Employability Skills	Mean	Minimum	Maximum	Sum
Open to feedback	6.43	4	7	90
Trustworthiness (honesty, integrity, reliability)	6.36	4	7	89
Willingness to learn attitude (from one's mistakes)	6.36	5	7	89
Team working skills/Interpersonal skills	6.36	3	7	89
Adaptability	6.21	4	7	87

Comparing the set of skills belonging to the two respondents' groups it can be noted that although the there are differences in perceiving the most important five skills, the skills selected by both groups belong to same dimensions (Reflection and Evaluation, 3S –Skills and generic skills). This confirms the above findings that, generally, the groups surveyed share a common perception of the important skills required for successful employability. However, there are some differences in perception regarding the most important skill determined by the analysis. According to the recruiters' group, the following skill is the perceived as most important - *Willingness to learn all the aspects of the business* - while the MBA graduates group perceived as most important *Open to feedback*. In the current study, the recruiters' responses were used as a benchmark since they are the ones to decide the employment rate. So as a

suggestion for increasing the employability chances, the MBA graduates are advised to concentrate on gaining those particular skills. The above finding is further corroborated by the t-test performed comparing the two groups surveyed:

6.3 The findings after performing the t-test (skill categories and each skill)

Further, in order to test the hypothesis regarding the perception gap between the groups surveyed on the skills required for successful employability in the Japanese context, a t-test is performed, in order to assess any statistically significant difference. Table 8 below indicates the results of the t-test for overall *skills categories*.

Table 8: The t-test performed comparing the 2 groups:

Skills Categories	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference
Subject Knowledge Total	-.342	23	.737	-.68831	2.01464
Generic Skills Total	-.208	23	.837	1.05844	5.07742
Emotional Intelligence Total	.556	23	.583	.57792	1.03885
Work Experience Total	1.291	23	.209	1.42857	1.10638
Career Development Total	-.117	23	.908	-.20779	1.77021
Reflection & Evaluation Total	.311	22	.759	-.48571	1.56036
3 Skills Total	-.609	21	.549	-1.30952	2.14884
Foreign Language Total	-.172	23	.865	-.67532	3.93280
Total Skill Total	-.351	21	.729	-5.55556	15.84306

The findings of the table above can be summarized as follows: for the main skills categories there is no statistically significant difference between the perceptions of the two groups surveyed regarding the importance of the skill necessary for successful employment in the Japanese context.

The t-test performed for each skill: The t-test performed (result not shown) comparing the two groups based on individual skills above indicates that except for the particular skills *Enterprise and Entrepreneurship spirit; Adaptability and Multicultural appreciation /global awareness* there is no statistical significant difference between the two respondent groups regarding the importance in terms of employability on the basis of each individual skills. Hence, the null hypothesis cannot be rejected which means that there is no statistically significant difference between the perception of the graduates and employers in terms of employability skills taken as skill categories or on an individual skill basis.

In Section 6 a discussion of findings and survey results were presented. The next section

summarizes the findings and formulates the conclusions.

7. Conclusion

This section states the conclusions that are derived based on the findings of the current research study. Firstly, conclusions related to the two main research objectives are presented, the results related to the development of the Comprehensive Skill Framework, and testing the hypothesis through survey.

The research study aimed at developing a Comprehensive Employability Skills Framework for successful employability of MBA graduates domesticated within the Japanese context. The most recent complete skills models determined through intensive literature survey had been aggregated and the final skills model had been domesticated for the Japanese context after discussions and brainstorming sessions with the MBA graduates and professionals involved in MBA graduates' recruiting. This section concludes on the research objective on establishment of the successful employability skill framework

The discussion on findings indicated that there is a high level of internal reliability for most of the measures as indicated by the Cronbach Alpha (see Table 3). External validity is ensured through incorporating recognized models and skill sets (CareerEDGE, 2007; etc.) indentified through the literature review.

Hence, it can be safely concluded that the proposed Employability Skills Framework has a high internal reliability and validity, and can be used as a tool to identify and rank the skills perceived as most important to ensure successful employability. This framework could be a useful tool for the graduate business schools for including in their curriculum the most sought after skills, those perceived as important for successful employment of MBA graduates.

As far as hypothesis testing is concerned, the analysis through ranking of the arithmetical means and the t-test found no significant difference regarding the perceived importance of the employability skills among the three main groups surveyed. Therefore, the null hypothesis cannot be rejected (which means that there is no statistically significant difference between the perception of the graduates and market) in terms of employability skills taken as skill categories or on an individual skill basis. That implies that, in the particular case of Waseda WBS/MBA, the two groups share the same perception of the skill categories required for successful employment, and they agree on the necessity of better understanding the most recent skills required, with a beneficial effect on the quality of the Japanese business

context. In terms of limitations of the current study and further study directions, it can be recommended that future studies may expand on the present one, studying these aspects more in-depth or more specifically in each field or graduates categories and addressing a larger (random) sample.

[Notes]

[1]   As the main purpose of the study was to create a Comprehensive Employability Skills Framework, a lower sample size is perceived to be justified.

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