Rhetoric But Whose Reality? The Influence of Employability Messages on Employee Mobility Tactics and Work Group Identification

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Abstract

Over the last decade, employability has been presented by its advocates as the solution to employment uncertainty, and by its critics as a management rhetoric possessing little relevance to the experiences of most workers. This article suggests that while employability has failed to develop into a key research area, a deeper probing of its message is warranted. In particular, it is suggested that employability may have resonance with employees as workers rather than as employees of their immediate employing organisation. This demands a slightly different approach to studying employability than some other related phenomena such as employee commitment which has resonance only in relation to the employing organization. In adopting a social identity approach, the significance of the employability message is shown not only to lie in employees' willingness to disassociate from their existing work groups and pursue individual mobility, but also in its capacity to undermine workers' collective responses to grievances and unwanted organizational changes. A future research agenda is presented which highlights the need to address recent attempts to develop employability expectations among graduate career entrants, and for a closer critical engagement with management writings that attempt to justify the unnecessary espousal of the self development message.

Introduction

Over the last decade, the concept of employability has been frequently espoused both by managers and some academics as a critical idea affecting how employees and employers should respond to the changes facing work, employment and organizations. With the core idea of employability being that workers continually develop their skills to retain their attractiveness in the labour market, its claimed importance has been in offering a response to recent problems facing the employment relationship brought about by flatter structures, periodic unemployment as a normal work experience, more frequent skills obsolescence, and fewer career opportunities. Put simply, employability has come to the fore as a solution to the dilemma of what can now be offered to workers in the face of shrinking career opportunities and the passing of stable employment (Barley, 1996).

For employers the appeal of employability is said to lie in replacing organizational career, promotion and security with a '*new definition of the employee-employer relationship* (which) *offers employees the opportunity to develop themselves and increase their employability in return for the increased skills and output required of*

them under a flat structure' (Holbeche, 1995: 27). Thus, if employees are to pursue varied types of employment across organizations rather than within a single organization or skill specialism, then they need to accept more responsibility than in the past for developing a portfolio of evolving skills and knowledge that is responsive to the changing labour market (Arthur and Rousseau. 1996; Dewhirst, 1991; Leadbetter, 1999). Above all, self development in a broad range of needed skill areas is seen as the remedy for 'over-specialization' and inevitable obsolescence (van der Heijden, 2002).

But for all the touting of the importance of self-developed portfolio skills by employers and academics alike, employability has neither developed as a concept that can illuminate our understanding of the employment relationship and the labour market predicaments currently facing workers, nor stimulated a programme of systematic research that examines its impact. For example, while the initiative lies with employees to develop themselves, organizations too are expected to provide the resources, experiences and context for this to happen. Yet, it is rare to find equivalent evidence of employer support for employability. On the few occasions where examples of employability practice are provided it is the same handful of organizations that tend to be cited (Guest, 2000 – e.g., Rover, Hewlett Packard; Motorola; IBM; ICL). Equally, when evidence for the support of employability is pursued elsewhere it is rarely found (Benyon et al., 2002; Guest, 2000). From a research perspective, therefore, if most organizations haven't pursued employability as a coherent set of policies and practices, then it stands to reason that there is in conventional research terms little for academics to actually investigate.

Besides concerns about how seriously organizations pursue employability, critics have also dismissed its academic treatment (Benyon et al., 2002). In being promoted as either something which has already begun to occur or the way that work and employment will be organised in the near future, advocates of employability have been accused of merely engaging in prophesy or espousing a managerialist normative agenda (Herriot and Stickland, 1996; Arnold, 1997; Knell, 2000). According to these critical accounts, employability is at most just one more hollow employer rhetoric with little relevance to the practices of most organizations and the work reality encountered by the majority of workers (Mounier, 2001; Thompson, 2003). The long

and the short of it is that while employability continues to feature regularly in journal articles and textbooks on human resource management and organizational behaviour, after more than a decade it remains peripheral to the core debates taking place about the current changes and continuities affecting contemporary work and employment.

But while acknowledging many of these deficiencies, this article argues that the place of employability in contemporary employment is still to be determined because of an insufficient examination of how its message is received and responded to by workers. In developing this argument, this paper has two main goals. The first is to suggest that a deeper probing of employability is warranted; not least in revealing its message to be quite distinct from most other contentious legitimatory approaches recently favoured by employers such as employee involvement and organizational commitment. Here we argue that the salience of employability to workers may be broader than in many other management initiatives because the employability message might dispose employees to self categorise themselves and behave as workers rather than just as members of a particular organization.

In arguing that in some situations employability ideas may raise issues for individuals as workers rather than merely as employees of a particular organization, our second objective, then, is to suggest that if we are to enhance our explanation of the meaning and effects of employability, we need to explore the process by which the content and multiple sources of its message impact on employees' social categorizations about their group membership and self definitions. In focusing on those situations where the person's identity derives from group memberships, and in its integration of social context and psychological processes, a social identity approach provides just such a framework.

Thus, in later sections of this article, we deploy a social identity approach to refine our understanding of how subordinate employees interpret and respond to the employability message. We show how reference to some of the principles of the social identity approach is particularly helpful for explaining the meanings employees attach to employability because it specifically examines the processes by which collections of individuals perceive and act towards their own and other significant groups (Bornman and Mynhardt, 1992; Turner and Oakes, 1997; O'Brien and Terry,

1999). Social identity theory not only recognises that aspects of identity derive from the groups we belong to, but also how we set about socially categorising important memberships and pursuing self enhancement strategies. Hence, social identity's emphasis on the processes by which group members decide how far they share beliefs about their self definitions is used to explain how messages about self development impinge on employees' willingness to disassociate themselves from their existing work groups to pursue individual mobility ambitions. As a by-product of this, we also highlight the potential of the employability message to stimulate enough of a personal orientation to undermine collective responses to grievances and unwanted organizational changes.

Finally, a future research agenda is identified around two main issues: the need to recognise that the scope of the employability message has grown to encompass graduate career entrants; and the benefits from a closer critical engagement with management writing and evidence that attempts to justify the general spreading of the message of self development. We begin a detailed discussion of these issues by further exploring some of the major limitations and ambiguities that beset the conceptual definition and assumptions that have been applied to employability.

Defining Employability: An Exercise in Ambiguity
The first difficulty encountered when assessing the claims for employability is that there is no agreement about its scope and content. Even among employability's strongest advocates it is possible to detect variations in its supposed purpose and significance. In one version, for example, the importance of taking steps to enhance employable skills, knowledge and experience is said to reside mainly in the capacity to alleviate workers' feelings of future insecurity (Castells, 1997; Hirsch, 1987). And so people who cultivate such skills are said to have no need to be afraid of the new setting since they are able to handle occupational transitions better than those who remain skilled in only a few things (Burt, 1992; Howard, 1995). In other versions, however, the significance of employability lies in engendering a fundamental change to the nature of what constitutes employment and career over a working lifetime, as well as in transforming the way that organizations are structured and manage their relationships with employees (Bridges, 1994; Brotherton, 1999; Kanter, 1989; Powell and Brantley, 1992). Writers here are espousing the inevitable emergence of an

employability culture that is central to how future work and employment will be resourced and managed. In particular, employees will increasingly be suppliers of services who have a market relationship with various organizations rather an employment relationship with a single employer (Watson, 2002: p.427). Kanter, (1989), for example, states: 'like it or not more and more people will find their career shaped by how they develop and market their skills and ideas'. In similar vein, Bandura (1997) argues that job rotations, promotion, transfers, geographical relocation are all characteristics of a new workplace that requires employees to develop whatever skills they lack to meet new work demands. But while presented as fact, both versions appear to be mainly reliant on a narrow range of partially supportive examples or alleged characteristics of near future work and organizations. As such, what is finally believed about the onset and role of employability really ends up a matter of personal choice.

A similar reliance on unsubstantiated claims permeates any consideration of the espoused benefits of employability. For example, van der Heijden (2001) asserts that while employees should broaden their skills portfolio in advance of their need if they are to increase their chances in the labour market, employer provision of internal horizontal moves will also provide equivalent pay offs for the organization. Thus, if employees widen their portfolio of expertise not only will they heighten their value to potential future employers, but also strengthen their current organizations. In particular, the organization will accrue added value from the sharing of specialist expertise between different functions leading to increased efficiency. Once again, while such claims for mutual benefits may be easy to make, on closer inspection they appear to hold little water. Especially problematic is the notion that internal horizontal moves automatically provide the additional capabilities needed to improve employees' chances in a future labour market.

While this assumption has always held some credence in particular occupations and specialist roles, in many other workplaces the widening of task roles could just as easily blur the distinctions that should exist between developing relevant labour market skills and the pursuit of organizational task flexibility. The fact is that widening task roles might be useful to an employee in the labour market, or it might not. A limiting factor here is that most horizontal moves are likely to be relatively

modest in terms of the depth of skill enhancement offered. Managements tend to be reluctant to engage in horizontal moves that put even short-term output, productivity or customer satisfaction at risk as the employee strives to reach standard performance. It follows that the type of horizontal tasks pursued will largely be dictated by what is deemed useful to the organization, rather than on the basis of what is best for the employability of the employee. To put this in a different way, the emphasis placed on horizontal re-skilling conflates the interests of employees in maintaining their currency in the external labour market with the interest of management in maximising the organization's functional flexibility.

The suspicion that employability is mostly about gaining benefits for management is further fuelled by the absence of any consideration of the complementary changes necessary to employers' customary recruitment practices. Writers who promote the idea of employability have always restricted the supportive role of managers to one of encouraging employee-initiated development. Yet, without the adoption of more varied recruitment criteria in terms of what is believed to constitute transferable expertise and experience, it is doubtful whether experienced job seekers will be any more valued by recruiters, even when they can point to a history of self-initiated development. The truth is that external recruiters are rarely prepared to step outside of their customary narrow appointment specifications because recruitment practice is steeped in the search for particular skills gained from highly conventional linear work backgrounds. As a fact of recruitment this is well recognised by experienced employees who are often wary of widening their task roles in case they become a costly distraction from maintaining or enhancing their core skills. In recent times, this point has been supported empirically by numerous studies of teamworking. Experienced operators often perceive multi-tasking as providing quite shallow horizontal development that limit opportunities to acquire the type of evolving depth of skill necessary to gain alternative employment (Ackroyd and Proctor, 1996; Warhurst and Thompson, 1998). In this sense, horizontal development is not only focused on internal task flexibility, but also on using the development of organization-specific skills to bind employees to the organization. From this we can see that while internal lateral moves may indirectly demonstrate an employee's adaptability, perceptions of their marketable expertise may if anything be undermined further in the employee's own eyes and those of external recruiters.

In reality, then, much of what passes for self-development may actually disadvantage employees should they be forced or wish to secure alternative employment. This being so, it is difficult to be confident that learning new skills will ease external movement unless employees happen to be located in the right sector, occupation, and age group. Given a situation where most recruiters award little value to multi-functional work experience, this assumption is unlikely to hold true for the majority of employees.

Quite apart from the employability versus internal flexibility issue, a notable weakness in all the discussions about the need for employability is the difficulty of predicting with any accuracy the skills that employees need to learn. To date, not a single discussant has been prepared to specify in any detail the type of future skills that current employees should be developing; leaving aside the rather vague but commonplace calls for employees to become more commercially aware; develop business skills and knowledge; and keep abreast of developments in IT (Thompson, 2003; Warhurst and Thompson, 1998). Given this inability to specify even the demand side for near future skills, predicting precisely what additional contributions self development can make to organizational performance now or in the near future remains elusive; other than to keep employees 'settled' with their current employers. Indeed, should a radical shift to the way most organizations produce their services or products become necessary, it is difficult to envisage how such prior haphazard self development would actually enable the necessary changes to occur without major injections of new capital investment and subsequent functional training. And here, the typical role of training in the adoption of new technology as one of playing catch up rather than strategic planning is an especially telling illustration of this (Lane, 1990).

Given that the actual skills needed to bring about the realisation of employability remain unclear, it is also disquieting that its strongest advocates have felt comfortable with suggesting that all workers are now affected by the need to self develop their future employability (Bridges, 1995; Handy, 1995). As Thompson (2003) has shown, even if some key areas of highly specialised expertise require an employability ethos, its generalization to broad sections of the workforce is highly questionable beyond the

gradual changes that impinge on the current use of personal computers across most occupations. Indeed, if only a small number of occupations are really affected by the need to develop an employability orientation, it stands to reason that most employers will be reluctant to help employees develop skills that are in strong demand by the external labour market. Apart from the sustained financial investment needed, training in short-supply functional and technical skills might highlight job opportunities that are preferable to workers' current employment. In this respect, it has long been apparent that one of the reasons why employers have privileged recruitment over sustained investments in training is because of the fear that trained staff will be poached by other organizations (Hendry, 1991).

Contrary to the general mobility message of employability, therefore, the continuities present in employers' recruitment and training practices suggest that managements will try to discourage their workers leaving them before the organization is ready. Because of this many of the prognostications made about employability in its widest sense fall into the categories of idle speculation and prophesy (Watson, 2002). And yet, this still leaves us with the question as to why employability has continued to be promoted as an issue affecting the majority of workers. For critical writers the answer to this question is to be found in employers' growing concerns about maintaining workforce control in an era of increased restructuring.

Employability as the Management of Meaning

In critical accounts the absence of employability practice signifies that it is the normative potential of its message that represents the real appeal of self development to employers. Writers such as Keenoy and Anthony (1992) argue that, in being predicated on an assumption of ubiquitous organizational change, the promotion of employability provides employers with the opportunity to distance themselves from responsibility for any harsh outcomes that arise from decisions about restructuring, layoffs and the intensification of work. And undoubtedly, while there is no getting away from the fact that there is uncertainty in the labour market, equally the mantra of constant change can also be seen as having been talked up by employing organizations far beyond the reality of market turbulence. As Guest (2000) has noted, major changes in work and society can be interpreted as a fillip to management action, but it also provides a setting in which a 'no guarantees' work culture can be

espoused in ways that attempt to absolve managers from appearing to break their customary agreements with workers. In this account, if employability serves to convince people to accept responsibility for managing their own futures, its practical purpose is much more about planning for a time when the current employer has no more use for the worker, than the other way round.

In a wider sense, however, employers' preoccupation with employability is illustrative of the agenda of neo-liberalism. Neo-liberalism has come to be associated with the idea of free market capitalism, deregulation and the rolling back of the state (Stiglitz, 2002). Yet if we move away from the idea that neo-liberalism is purely about markets, neo-liberalism also can be seen as a form of social regulation based on a set of arguments about social and personal conduct which reinforces state and private enterprise's power and sovereignty. People are told to take charge of their own well-being and make rational decisions to avoid social problems like unemployment and poverty. Thus people should take on training, to learn new skills to enhance their abilities and self esteem (Joseph, 2007).

Given their longstanding neglect of training, it is ironic that employers' first attempts to pass this kind of responsibility to workers can be traced to their decision to enter the public arena in the guise of champions of self-development training. The origins of such efforts can be dated to the mid 1990s when stories began to appear in the business press and broadcasting media about how employers now regarded training as critical to their organizations' futures (see for example People Management, 1995a; Daly, 1996). Alec Daly, then Deputy Director General of the CBI and Howard Davies, a previous Deputy Governor of the Bank of England, were just two early examples among numerous employer representatives and, for that matter senior managers themselves, who started to argue publicly that lifelong training was one of the key factors in improving company competitiveness (Radio 4, 29 September 1995; Daly, 1996; Lee, 1996).

These early forays into the public arena were soon accompanied by a wave of other employer pronouncements about their more active involvement in enhancing the skills of workers. In the wake of the formation of the Management Charter Initiative, expressions of this new-found commitment could be detected in high profile projects

as diverse as the Career Research Forum, formed by thirty-three leading private and public sector companies to examine the impact of restructuring on the shape and development of organizational careers (Guest and MacKensie-Davy, 1996), to the trend of setting up company 'universities' by, among others, Unipart, Ford, Rover and Motorola. At Unipart, for instance, much was made of the fact that the Chief Executive as well as many other directors and senior managers were now regularly involved in the development and delivery of staff training (People Management, 1995b).

Even more surprising was the fact that this enthusiasm for influencing the course of training started to become increasingly targeted outside the employing organization. Employers, so the argument went, needed to have a bigger say in shaping the curriculum not just of school-level and further education but also of undergraduate and postgraduate degree courses (Merriden, 1997). As part of industry's effort to exercise more control over higher education, the CBI began to signal that employers might even be prepared to boycott those universities which failed to improve the quality of their teaching. Failing to respond to these warnings, it was reported, might result in the emergence of more and more company universities and the provision of alternative qualifications by management training consultancies (Carvel, 1997).

But while presented as urgent and vital to business performance, such exercises then as now seemed mostly to focus on developing workers' organizational orientations, rather than on alleviating the long identified weaknesses in intermediate functional skills (Heyes and Stuart, 1994; Stevens and Walsh, 1991). And accordingly, it is here in the perceived risks to career opportunities and employment security where the rationale for employers to espouse the notion of life-long, self-development is to be found. Put simply, the idea of self development training has become more appealing to employers than most other forms of employee learning, because it allows considerable opportunity for promoting an apparent coincidence of organizational and worker interests. Two aspects of the employment relationship can be seen as particularly suitable to being shaped by employers' espousal of self-developed employability.

In the first, the idea of partnership has been advocated where the responsibility for upgrading the skills of workers is shared both by the employee and the employer(e.g., Guest and Mackenzie-Davy, 1996). The following comments from the training manager of Vauxhall Motors are illustrative of how the new philosophy of partnership has been espoused:

We want to be sure people understand there are less opportunities for progression and promotion, and that qualifications alone do not guarantee advancement. We also like to be sure a range of options are explored and that people are aware of what learning is right for them, and what level of learning is appropriate. Second, we are helping people develop the skills of self-guidance, so in the future they can evaluate training and other opportunities for themselves.
(Gill Parsons, Training Manager, Vauxhall Motors - from Parsons and Stickland, 1996: 601)

Secondly, self development has become a critical element in employers' attempts to legitimise what managers now like to refer to as the 'new' psychological contract. The so-called 'new' psychological contract differs from the established concept propounded by Argyris (1960) and MacNeil (1985), in that it refers to a managerialist version of the employment relationship which is not only normative but also one which eschews many of the essential features of contracting such as mutuality, reciprocity, voluntariness, paid for promises, and notions of breach and violation for non-fulfilment of obligations under the agreement (Rousseau, 1995; Hallier and James, 1997). As with so many other HRM ideas, the 'new' psychological contract is far more potent as a mechanism for managing meaning than as a viable technique or practice. Its real purpose is to balance the unequal exchanges that characterise employers' unilateral withdrawal of careers and security with their pursuit of employee commitment.

In this balancing role, the espoused 'newness' of the new psychological contract can provide employers with a useful rhetorical device for legitimizing what they perceive as necessary changes to the terms and conditions of large sections of the employed population. Labelling it the 'new' psychological contract enables management actions to acquire something of a quasi-academic status and also in a curious way

implies that the changes in question are both inevitable and have already occurred. The term 'new', thus, becomes crucial to deflecting worker objections to unilateral change since it is more difficult to resist the reasonableness and actuality of something which is both the shape of things to come and has purportedly already come about. Part of the purpose of this temporal manipulation, therefore, has been to show that objections are not just pointless but also misguided.

As part of the attempt to legitimate this new psychological contract, the role played by employability is more one of convincing employees to accept the outcomes to terms, conditions and security of this new climate than genuinely to enhance the marketability and security of workers in general. With the focus on developing organizational and work attitudes, rather than on making up the shortfall in intermediate functional skills, the rhetoric of employability serves to maintain the appearance of continuity in employers' fulfilment of contractual obligations in the face of any withdrawal of longstanding employee benefits. Above all, if the aim is to divorce employers from central responsibility for declines in job security and career opportunities, and to place them upon individual workers, then the notion of self-development training becomes critical to achieving this balancing act by appearing to make employees more employable in the open market.

The outcome of these different initiatives, then, is that as workers we are being told to become more enterprising people and more responsible beings. Within employers' applications of neo-liberalism in the labour market the employee's exercise of freedom takes the form of the behaviour of a seller of skills expected to follow the competitive rules of conduct. Under these rules of conduct workers are free to sell their labour, but just as with any other commodity the employer is also free to buy or decline to purchase. In this way, neo-liberalism helps us to understand why employability continues to be promoted through things like the ideology of individualization and personal competition; the new psychological contract; and in employers' drive to have a say in education. Essentially, these are all part of the overall agenda of re-commodifying or marketising labour power within neo-liberalism.

But while the agenda of neo-liberalism accounts for why the espousal of employability has become so appealing to employers, we are still left with the question of whether its message has been received in the way that employers intended. And here in subsuming employability within an organizational commitment logic, the next sections suggest that the predominant rhetoric versus reality framework of analysis has stopped short of evaluating the impact of employability as a distinct message that emanates from multiple sources.

Rhetoric Versus Which Reality?

As with most other employer rhetorics aimed at inspiring positive employee attitudes, critical writers have concluded that management's legitimatory intentions for employability are easily seen through by employees because of the visible gap between the espoused message and the lack of dedicated policy and practical support provided by employing organizations. Underlying much employer rhetoric has been the pursuit of organizational commitment as reflected in an array of HRM practices that attempt to orchestrate employee attachment to high performance and customer-satisfaction work regimes (Legge, 2005). Yet, despite management's continued focus on the commitment issue, the consensus among critical commentators has not only been that these efforts have failed to develop substantial levels of workforce commitment, but also that employees generally have seen the contrasts between employers' messages of mutuality and the short-term, hard HRM version reality (Thompson, 2003). Far from a willingness to accept management accounts, most employees have either deployed a resigned, often sceptical compliance, or they have attempted to mimic management's own rhetorics' in order to protect their positions by appearing to be 'on side' (Collinson and Collinson, 1997; Hallier, 2004).

Because of this oft-found gap between the espousal of a unitarist employment relationship and management deeds, the essential contribution of studying management rhetorics has been to 'out' this gap between managements' soft long-term commitment messages and the short-term hard version realities that have been pursued in practice (Legge, 2005). Indeed, Thompson states the received position when saying that 'the gap between managerial words and deeds is the classic territory of critical scholarship, aided by the use of detailed workplace studies and ethnographies' (2003: 364). In effect, much of the purpose underlying the critical

study of management initiatives over the last twenty years has been to reveal the legitimatory content and aims of employee-centred ideas and practices such as high commitment HRM, flexible and quality work practices, culture, and teamworking.

Given so much evidence that employees have responded sceptically to employers' rhetorics of commitment, critical analysis has tended to cease once the gap between the rhetoric of mutuality and organizational deeds has been revealed. Unfortunately, because employability has been seen as a subordinate component of employers' wider commitment rhetoric, it too has been seen to require no further analysis since the established critique of commitment has been safely assumed to encompass the same issues raised by self development. Like commitment, therefore, any gap presented between the employability message and its practice has been seen as sufficient. In this regard, Thompson (2003) has spoken for many in dismissing the importance of employability as a largely irrelevant rhetoric when he says that the very last place to look for what has been going on in employment over the last twenty years is this very type of management writing.

This is not to say that the rhetoric versus reality approach has been unable to shed light on employers' legitimatory aims for employability. Nevertheless, if we probe the distinctions that exist between management's rhetoric of commitment and the rhetoric of employability in more depth, it is apparent that not all rhetorics are likely to operate on employee attitudes in the same way, even when there is an obvious gap between managements' statements and deeds.

Employability Rhetoric as Subjective Reality
Given that employability has been largely subsumed within organizational commitment under the rhetoric versus reality framework, our exploration of their differences starts with assessing the founding rationale for the assumed impact on workers of the rhetoric of commitment. Here the assumption that employees can see through the hollowness of commitment in employer practices is predicated on several features of its message and the type of practices that employers typically pursue.

Firstly, the source of the pursuit of commitment by managers in many ways stems from their recognition that employers and employees have quite different interests;

which in themselves are difficult to reconcile, and also lend themselves to quite critical responses by employees where managements appear not to be fulfilling their side of the bargain. In itself, the pursuit of high commitment HRM practices such as person-centred recruitment and appraisal, culture change, and employee involvement reflects longstanding management concerns and doubts about the organizational attitudes and identification of at least some sections of employees. In large part, then, managements' explicit preoccupation with developing employee identification with the organization appears to stem from a deeply embedded distrust of workers and the accompanying problems of labour control. On the other side of this coin, an equally long tradition of 'them and us' attitudes towards managements can be found among many employees, and which accounts for employee scrutiny of any noticeable differences that surface between management's exhortations of a mutual relationship and its actions (Kelly and Kelly, 1991).

Secondly, the difficulty with securing widespread employee commitment to the organization and its management is exacerbated because the primary locus of employees' engagement and identification at work tends to be located elsewhere. Findings have long revealed that employees' primary work identification is often not to their organization at all but to their skills, work function, or member group (Marks and Collyer, 2005). And here, self categorization theory explains why organizational commitment is unlikely to be a natural focus for employee identification and the pursuit of self esteem. Put simply, employees' social identities become focused primarily at levels below the organization because they are more able to make meaningful and regular comparisons between different work groups than between different organizations. That is, in the pursuit of self esteem, work group identities allow more scope than at the organizational level for employees to stereotype judgements of their ingroup membership as in some way special, superior and distinct from others. This being so, management automatically faces an uphill struggle when pursuing organizational commitment since it represents a self-defining category which first has to be made salient for employees over preferred group levels of self categorization before it can even begin to be pursued effectively.

If we accept that organizational commitment is rarely meaningful as an overriding source of workers' self identity and esteem, then it follows that management's

attempts to generate substantial commitment to the organization will end up being critically scrutinised by workers when exhorted to see their interests and futures as compatible with those of their management. At the very least a cautious stance can be expected because employees will wish to avoid doing anything that could risk existing self-definitions. In those commonplace instances where the commitment message is characterised by a lack of consistency, therefore, it is entirely in keeping with social identity theory that studies adopting the rhetoric versus reality framework of analysis have routinely found extensive workforce scepticism.

In the wake of such findings, critical writers have largely subsumed employability within the predominant assessment of organizational commitment. We believe this is because of the frequent proximity of the delivery of these two messages. Numerous commentaries and empirical studies have drawn attention to the fact that while employers are trying to pursue commitment through employee involvement, and other HRM-related employee-centred practices, they are also giving out a no guarantees employment culture which in effect says that jobs are no longer for life. The reason why employability and commitment have become so linked in critical accounts, then, is the fact that they appear to embody the two sides of a single but contradictory management message. That is, on the one hand, employees are expected to be highly committed to what is presented as a mutual relationship, while at the same time accepting that there is less organizational opportunity and security. Put another way, employees are being exhorted to be committed to the organization but also accept that they are disposable in times of crisis.

Because such contradictions are reinforced by so few examples of employability in practice, critical writers have been quick to dismiss out of hand its singular importance. Employability is assumed to be just one factor among many that contributes to the oft-found gulf between rhetoric and reality and the failure of the whole commitment approach. And so, in pairing commitment with employability, it follows that if employees can be expected to cynically withhold their commitment and identification to the organization, they will likewise reject management's message of employability.

But while employability may well operate at the specific organizational level to reinforce the reasons why employees withhold their commitment to their current organizations, it may also affect workers independently in terms of any perceived concerns or ambitions they hold about their wider value in the labour market. In this sense, when employees think about their personal security and advancement, issues of employability are likely to be far closer to the core concerns of some workers than is the issue of organizational commitment; especially where this is accompanied by perceived threats to workers' employment. The fact is that if we consider the workings of employability in this way, many of the core assumptions applied to it as part of the commitment rhetoric simply become less salient to how employees evaluate their personal positions and choices.

This is not to ignore the fact that any gap which appears between the rhetoric and practice of employability may certainly discourage employee commitment to the organization. Nevertheless, the nature of this form of analysis rules out the possibility that employability also might speak to workers' self definitions elsewhere. This is particularly likely to be the case when workers think about employability in terms of their personal predicaments. It is here when individuals see themselves as workers in a general sense rather than as employees of a particular organization that the salience of employability is just as likely to be assessed beyond as within the border of the current organization. Following Bruner (1957) this is because a crucial determinant of social definition is comparative fit, or the degree to which a particular social definition matches subjectively relevant features of reality in a particular setting. This feature of the social categorization process means that any given collection of social stimuli will be experienced as self defining to the extent that their differences are less than the differences between them and other possible categories (Oakes, 1987; Haslam and Turner, 1998). So for example, an economist and sociologist are more likely to see themselves as sharing the social identity of social scientist when they occupy a setting that includes other people who are non-social scientists such as engineers or computer scientists (Haslam, 2005). And so in applying this social categorization thinking to employability, we might say that while its organizational message may well yield a cynical reaction by employees in response to the empty promises of their current management, when more inclusive worker self definitions are triggered its meaning may be entirely different.

Here the focus of the person's self categorization will be more directed towards protecting their status as a worker in the external labour market and less as an employee of a particular organization. In this mindset, the process of self categorization is operating at a higher and more inclusive level of self-definition where the assessment of the employability message becomes extended beyond the here and now to include its relevance to protecting opportunities for future membership across organizations. And so, unlike organizational commitment, the significance of the message in itself will not be dependent solely on the undertakings or omissions of a present employer. The result is that an employer's failure to invest in employability in any practical sense will not negate the perceived veracity and relevance of its general message in the wider employment setting.

At this more inclusive level of self definition, then, it is misleading to expect management's commitment and employability rhetorics to be always received by employees in the same way, even when there is a visible gap between management statements and deeds. This is not to argue that where employability's external message is attended, employee attitudes will necessarily endorse or commit to management or the organization. Indeed, there is widespread evidence that most workers respond in this way to management failures to implement their own rhetoric of better human resource policy, training, or service quality. Equally though, dismissing or being sceptical about management's promises and motives does not necessarily equate with a rejection of all of the substance of employability espoused by management.

This being so, our next task in understanding how employees as individuals and as members of work groups judge and respond to employability ideas, is to determine more precisely the process by which employability's wider self salience becomes triggered and received by many employees. In explaining the process by which group members' pursue self enhancement and protection, a social identity approach once more offers important insights about how management's message and treatment of employability are interpreted and acted upon.

Credible Sources of the Employability Message

So far we have shown how the perceived relevance of the employability message to a person's position can vary according to the level of self categorization to which it is applied. Thus, when employability issues are interpreted in terms of their role in developing commitment to the current organization, they may well be dismissed by employees as irrelevant management rhetoric, whereas their salience to a person's self categorization as an insecure worker may be considerable. Even so, we might still conclude that management's credibility as a mouthpiece for employability messages might be tarnished here by a commitment emphasis and thus thwart the emergence of a 'worker' self categorization. The point is that whether or not the employability idea is awarded personal salience will not just depend on the employee's concerns about insecurity or skill obsolescence but also on how similar the communicator is perceived to be to the receiver's member group. And here studies investigating this aspect of social categorization theory have shown that it is only possible to exert influence over how others pursue a particular version of self esteem where the communicator and receiver are seen to belong to a common social membership. (Balaam and Haslam, 1998; Mackie et al., 1990; McGarty et al., 1993; 1994; Oakes et al, 1991). Only those with whom we believe we share a common self definition will be seen as credible to inform us about relevant aspects of social reality and thus reduce our uncertainty.

That said, in the same way that the principles underpinning comparative fit demonstrate that different self defining groups will become salient in different situations, so too a communicator who is seen as sharing a common social membership is rarely fixed. In this sense, employee willingness to accept ideas from management will vary according to how workers structure their social self definitions in terms of the context applying at the time. In particular, establishing comparative fit also involves reaching a judgement about how a chosen categorisation of who we are in a given moment and setting is seen to advance our interests. And so, while employees, for example, may be guarded about identifying with the current organization's entire management group, identifications with favoured management sub-groups or specific managers may still occur. Indeed, given the wide range of concerns raised by the notion of employability, there is much room for some employees, whether at low subordinate levels or among the ranks of specialists and

professionals, to be willing to attend and even respect the views and accounts of particular managers with whom they interact regularly. Where such informal relationships develop, therefore, not all members of management will necessarily be clearly identified with the formal organizational position; nor will everything they say be tarnished with any apparent management duplicity over commitment. Thus, to see particular managers as workers may become fitting where employees believe that they share a similar employability predicament.

Our broad point then is that, even where formal commitment practices are perceived to be widely discredited, it is probably a mistake to conclude that employees will disregard all the messages espoused by every manager. Among conventional critiques of employability this point seems to have been overlooked, perhaps not least because of the tendency to lump managers together as homogenous group when they are anything but (Watson, 1994), and also because it is relatively easy to ridicule the more inflated prognostications made about the future of work and employment by pro-management writers. Here the normative messages surrounding self-development and portfolio skills constitute an easy target when critical writers make the case for employees recognising such outpourings as readily understood examples of exaggeration and phoney prophesy.

Apart from the weight given to the views of respected managers, the message of employability may be given added credence especially where it is reinforced by other credible external sources. As we have seen earlier, employability concerns tend to focus attention at a more inclusive level of categorization of the self than commitment. Unlike purely organizational rhetorics like commitment, it also follows that credible sources of the employability message may also become more diverse in terms of who is deemed to be an informed, similar member. For example, while it is not unreasonable to assume that most employees will be unfamiliar with the critical academic literature denouncing employability ideas as futuristic puffery, neither does this mean that they are automatically immune to other positive accounts that can be found in the mass consumer market for management guru wisdom that assail our attention everywhere from retail book chains to the print and broadcast media. Indeed, it seems unlikely that all workers are entirely ignorant of and resistant to these populist expressions of the employability message. And so, while Thompson (2003)

is right to dismiss popular management writings as unrealistic depictions of what has been going on over the last decade or so, it is an equal misreading of another aspect of reality to conclude that their ideas cannot penetrate some of the popular psyche; not least because these are some of the very people at whom the message is directed.

An equally neglected source for reinforcing the employability message arises from employees' own observations of the different ways in which the current employment market impacts on the significant people around them. Once more, the predominant management rhetoric and reality approach in recent years has meant that the person's wider social network has all but been ignored as an important source of how the changes and continuities that now characterise the employment landscape are interpreted. Fellow workers, friends and family members are just as likely to be regarded as important sources of employee interpretation about how the employment system operates as any other. Of special importance may be co-workers who have become victims of the uncertainties that pervade the labour market. Here we are not referring purely to what is usually termed survivor syndrome, but also to the work intensification endured by those that remain and those affected by the increasing temporary and externalised nature of employment. These are all observable features of the workplace that can be personalised to people who are known and capable of reinforcing the negative reach of the employment setting in which they now have to work. And, lest we forget, the ultimate appeal of the employability message is unlikely to emanate from its negative features. Critical to the reinforcement of that aspect of the message which peddles the benefits of developing occupational mobility and marketable skills will be observations of similar people who have escaped and advanced by developing their transferability.

Yet even where the employability message is espoused or demonstrated by credible 'like-minded' actors, social identity theory suggests that it is only when employees choose to define themselves as individuals that they will be inclined to initiate actions that promote their personal identity. Consequently, the impact of employability messages on employee actions is still likely to remain negligible unless employees privilege their relevance to their personal esteem and advancement rather than to a social categorisation of themselves as a member of a work or occupational group. In this sense, the employability message can be still expected to fall on deaf ears where

workers primarily categorise themselves at a collective level because their actions will continue to be directed at promoting their social identity as members of their work group or occupation. It is only where a personal self category becomes salient that employees can be expected to pursue self enhancement through modes of behaviour that are aimed at individualised advancement or ones that downplay the importance of their existing group membership and goals. The decision either to pursue individual goals or the interests of a collective membership thus will derive from how a specific context triggers the salience of a personal or social self category. And here some of the potency of the employability message to privilege the personal self lies in the way that it not only speaks to individualised concerns, but also in the way it offers self development as a highly personalised solution to insecurity and limited advancement.

The Impact of Employability on Personal and Social Identity Salience

Under a social identity perspective on employability, an emphasis on achievement, recognition, and advancement alone is seen as insufficient to trigger a personalised self focus in those who so far have identified themselves as members of their work or occupational group. Social categorization theory states that a shift to personal identity goals also relies on the person seeing their present group membership as one with relatively low status and security, as well as from believing that access to a higher status group is possible (Haslam, 2005). This being so, if the self development message is to be acted upon, it also needs to be accompanied by new beliefs that suggest that individual mobility tactics are more likely to deliver enhanced self esteem than the alternative of retaining a strong collective identification with the present group (Boen and Vanbeselaere, 2000, 2002; Terry, 2003; Terry et al., 2001). According to social identity theory one of the ways that individual mobility beliefs become predominant is for members of a lower status group to perceive differential opportunities to join to a higher status group (Smith et al., 1994).

What do these principles suggest about how employability messages might loosen existing collective ties with the group and trigger a shift towards individual mobility beliefs? Part of the way that employability concerns may be expected to draw workers towards personalising their predicaments is provided by the appearance of 'token' winners who illustrate the potential to escape low status groups and conditions. Despite widespread reductions in work conditions and standards of

treatment, there is still enough potential for some workers to become strong advocates of employability's message of individual mobility as a response to the few who appear to 'buck the general trend' and achieve self made success (Gelineau and Merenda, 1981; Wright and Taylor, 1998). The means by which these examples of personal advancement reinforce the individual mobility message of employability lies in stimulating inter-personal explanations for token winners' apparent successes. And here, the employability ethos of 'opportunity for all' provides a fitting explanation for any observable successes by encouraging key individuals to differentiate themselves from the rest of their member colleagues. In this way, the appearance of 'token winners' may be expected to encourage some subordinate workers to replace their group identification with individualistic beliefs about the available paths to security and advancement.

Nevertheless, if the importance of the employability idea were only to lie in its capacity to encourage individual mobility beliefs among a small minority of employees, then its significance would be restricted to explaining how some employees might be persuaded to endorse the portfolio career ethos. Yet, we believe that this is not its major significance. Drawing further on the principles and findings of research into tokenism, the next section reveals how the emergence of even modest instances of individual mobility may not only restrict work group identification, but also limit the potential for employees' collective resistance to grievances.

The Wider Significance of the Employability Message
According to social identity theory, any collective response is only made possible when group members are willing to depersonalise the self in favour of a collective self categorization so that the protection of esteem is seen as best pursued through the collective actions of the group. In other words, while a group's shared experience of injustice is necessary to trigger collective resistance to losses imposed by management, a sense of grievance by itself will be insufficient.

Experimental research supports this conclusion by suggesting that only a few group members are needed to endorse an ideology of individual mobility for any existing propensity for collective protest to become weakened. Studies mainly conducted by Taylor and his colleagues demonstrate how the slightest likelihood of individual

advancement, even in the face of disconfirming reality is capable of dampening a shared collective identity (Taylor et al., 1987; Wright et al., 1990; Wright and Taylor, 1998). In emanating mainly from laboratory experiments these results can be accused of being divorced from the reality of the workplace. Nevertheless, they do suggest that the number of instances of individualistic advancement may not have to be especially high but merely noticeable for other group members to pull away from identifying with the current subordinate group membership and to weaken employees' collective resistance to managerial change. Here the pursuit of personal advancement strategies by a few has the capacity to undermine the coherence of the membership not just because they disassociate themselves from their colleagues, but also because they then act as if the group is heterogeneous. At most, these low identifiers with the group will be strategic in terms of deciding those battles on which they will support the group and those where they will pursue their individual interests.

Since these low identifiers with the group tend to personalise any threat to their interests by adopting individual strategies, the effects of tokenism especially provide a way for management to quite effectively deploy discriminatory practices that benefit the few with little chance of provoking collective forms of protest. This results because, the message of employability combines with the appearance of token winners to feed individual fears of organizational obsolescence, while at the same time providing individualised solutions as the preferred means to maintain or increase value in the labour market. Ironically, then, while the abandonment of customary treatment should provide the foundation for collective protest, the accompanying espousal of employability as its solution has the capacity to reduce the risks to management of employee opposition.

A key point to be drawn from this is that employability rhetorics combined with differential treatment of the workforce weaken collective identity because not all workers will adopt individual mobility beliefs. If they did, the dilemmas facing employers would in practice be much greater. At the very least, employers would be under more pressure than at present to deliver some of the practical measures usually advocated to support employability. Instead, by deploying selective benefits, tokenist treatment operates to convince employees that their colleagues are their main competition. The subtle interplay between highlighting a negative threat and

individualised escape route within the employability message focuses on just this by encouraging workers to think of them selves as located in a meritocratic melting pot in which they are constrained only by their own imagination and talent. In this sense, employability provides the stimulus to a competitive form of individualisation that pits worker against worker in a never-ending race for employer acceptance.

Curiously, while such conclusions are drawn from the tenets of social identity theory, managements seem well aware of the power of selective treatment in their continued use of rhetorics that espouse the dubious notion of opportunities for all even in the face of widespread restructuring, work intensification and insecurity. Indeed, management's espousal of a widespread ideology of personal mobility combined with a selective distribution of benefits and opportunities may be one of the reasons why employers seem to display so little concern over any discrepancies that arise between their statements and deeds. What this suggests is that where employability is used to promote individualism, there may be something to be gained for managers from visible gaps arising between their rhetoric and practice. In this regard, perhaps it is not an overstatement to suggest that employers' sustained injunctions for workers to think of themselves as individuals has been one of the contributors to a sustained decline in work-based collective action (Taylor et al., 1987). Meanwhile, in continuing to privilege the role of collective grievance, much critical writing has continued to undervalue the importance of proto-typical group identification as a necessary element in the triggering of collective opposition.

The Need to Challenge Employability Efficacy
Our analysis so far gives some sense of the mediating role that tokenism can play in personalising identity and developing individual mobility beliefs in the wake of employability rhetorics from multiple sources. From this it is possible to argue that the potential for the employability message to stimulate enough of a personal orientation of this type to undermine collective resistance to unwanted changes is considerable. It should also be evident that the wider contribution of a social identity perspective lies in explaining how the rhetoric versus reality framework falls far short as an adequate exposition of workers' reactions to the employability idea since it ignores the process by which message salience and source credibility de-socialise workers' self categorizations. Above all, without the insights that a social identity

perspective can bring to disentangling how organizational commitment and employability rhetorics differ, their coincidence will continue to be assumed and hamper future research progress. Contrary to established rhetoric versus reality assumptions, therefore, we believe that there are non-reactionary grounds for ensuring that the full range of implications about employability offered by a social identity approach is systematically inspected and interrogated.

This is not to say that realising the potential contribution of a social identity perspective is assured however. Even if the differences between commitment and employability rhetorics were to be widely accepted, much of the value of exploring the relationship between social identity and employability still depends on the purposes to which it is put. Haslam et al. (2003) recently emphasised this point when they suggested that history is replete with examples of leaders who have achieved pernicious outcomes from attempts to create and control a shared (sometimes impractical) vision (p.365). Yet, if the potential dangers associated with organizational leaders' attempts to craft identity are more than apparent, such ambitions are sometimes no less beguiling in some quarters of organizational research. Earlier we signalled how some writers have essentially asserted rather than demonstrated the importance of employability as a fact of current or near future employment. Equally misguided are recent efforts among some organizational scholars to legitimise these assumptions further by a normative deployment of other theoretical assumptions drawn from social psychology. In a misuse of self efficacy theory, this work has attempted to embellish the existing self development advice dished out to workers, by also exhorting them to apply what is referred to as the new rules of employment acceptability. More precisely, the additional claim being made here is that success in employability is (or soon will be) mainly about employees displaying employability confidence as the basis for persuading employers of their worthiness. No less than the rhetoric and reality approach, this strand of work warrants detailed scrutiny.

One of the major advocates of this suitability message is Bandura (1997), who argues that employability is mainly achieved through a generalised form of confidence learning so that employees can apply the rules and strategies of employability to deal with different employment situations rather than just specific responses or scripted

routines. Instead of developing functional skills, therefore, the learning of employability confidence is presented as the essential requirement if a person is to be seen by employers as suitable to switch employment or to radically shift roles in organizations. The incentive offered is that once armed with high employability efficacy, far from facing a more difficult labour market, employees will encounter an exciting and rewarding employment setting (Brotherton, 1999).

Despite the neutrality that the use of self efficacy theory is supposed to bring to the analysis of employability, a number of misuses are evident when it is applied in this way. Not least of these is the fact that the need for employability confidence is predicated on the assumption that existing or prospective employees have to convince employers that they are worthy of opportunity. Commentators in this vein usually make it clear that not only do employees have to take responsibility for initiating their employability development, but also for convincing managers that they deserve patronage and support. A typical expression of this is supplied by Brotherton (1999, who says: *'Those of us seeking to develop our boundaryless careers will do well to find managers who are high in self-efficacy – they are most likely to make empowerment a reality for us personally'* (172). And so, although self efficacy skills are couched in the language of personal empowerment, their very requirement is predicated on a managerialist demand for employees to demonstrate their acceptability.

Writers in this vein are also prone to harnessing the theoretical status of efficacy as an added justification to exhort everyone to acquire the skills of employability confidence (Brotherton, 1999). Although depicted as a means to help employees, employability efficacy in this guise becomes coupled to a general imperative for the sensible employee to adapt to these new rules if they are to join the long-term winners. And so, while people who are prepared to cultivate such skills are said to be equipped to exploit the benefits of the new setting, it is also apparent that lurking within the 'self-efficacy as worthiness' argument are a number of demonising judgements about those who can't or won't get the message. Underpinning the message that emerges is an implicit but stark warning: those who are sensible and embrace the new employment system will be rewarded by their own efforts, while those who won't deserve to fall behind.

In one sense, then, this approach is no less normative than the claim that employability and the boundaryless career are key features of the new labour market. Less defendable, however, is the way that this vein of work invokes efficacy theory as a means to lend academic weight to the growing emphasis on employee acceptability. In consequence, efficacy theory is affiliated with employability to justify the shift in management's selection and assessment criteria even further away from functional skills and abilities, and more towards the normative control criteria of individual deference and cooperation.

Far from being a neutral exposition, therefore, the application of efficacy theory in this way acts to legitimise employers' increasing replacement of job skills criteria with those of person-centred suitability. Of course, none of this is to say that managements should not attempt to find better ways to recruit and to promote their most talented workers. Nor are we suggesting that self efficacy in itself might not represent a relevant selection criterion in some occupational settings. Rather, the concern here is that such assumptions have begun to be presented both as a widespread organizational imperative and as a vital management strategy without the necessary empirical evidence to justify their relevance to current and future labour markets.

Taking all these arguments together, there is little reason to depict self efficacy as a necessary skill to guarantee future employability. Instead, what we are left with is the normative use of a reputable theory solely in the service of a managerialist agenda to shift more responsibility onto workers and employees for any negative outcomes that arise in the employment relationship. In a general sense, it follows that not only is there a need to be wary of the uses to which employability may be put by managers, but also of any certainty that its implications will be adequately explored and assessed. While a social identity approach offers rich possibilities for examining employability critically, the rhetoric and reality framework has served so far to blindside researchers to many of the flaws in the managerialist literature. In the meantime, the pro-employability argument continues without much challenge to attribute a largely non-existent problem to wide sections of work and employment,

and to advance the notion of employee worthiness as a means for organizations to quietly reduce their responsibility for any failures in the labour market.

Conclusions

In this article we have presented what we see as the strong case for employability to be treated as a substantial issue worthy of conceptual development and sustained empirical examination. For this to happen it is necessary for employability to cease being seen as reducible merely to a rhetoric and reality frame of analysis. To do anything else is to shut off any examination of the significant impacts of the employability idea prematurely. Once we acknowledge the limitations of depicting a unitary understanding of reality as merely any visible gap between management's expressions and practices, it becomes apparent that employability acts on the self cognitions and social behaviours of employees in quite different ways to the pursuit of organizational commitment to which it is so often aligned. Above all, without a theoretical underpinning to the analysis of management rhetoric to determine the processes by which employees formulate different views about changes affecting their conditions, treatment and future opportunities, commentators of all persuasions will continue to find supporting evidence for the argument or position they wish to promote. Putting the problem baldly, there is sufficient unexplained variety in the ways that workers are responding to current management ideas and practices to enable normative employability writers especially to depict worker reactions any way they wish.

By adopting a social identity perspective, however, a more complex response to self-developed employability rhetoric is suggested, and one which requires us to probe more deeply than is possible using the predominant rhetoric versus reality approach. If one accepts the truth of this analysis, then it stands to reason that critical writers now need to re-direct their efforts to an empirical programme that can shed light on these misconceptions. We end this article with some suggestions as to the direction this future research might take.

Firstly, benefits would accrue from a programme of fine-grained studies tailored to examine and demonstrate the various ways in which employability messages may hinder collective identifications and dissent both in unionised and non-unionised work settings. That said, the need to map out the impact of employability messages within different work settings has if anything increased in recent years since it is not just long-service workers who are now the target of the employability message. Given the recent and continuing expansion of higher education, the perceived need for employers to shape employee expectations is required at much earlier stages of the employment experience. Much of the impetus here emanates from recent signs that some new types of graduate are forced to colonise occupations previously held by non-graduates.

Occupations in the New and Niche graduate categories are largely located in employment such as Public Services and Management where Rodgers and Waters (2001) suggest that it is difficult to see anything but limited career progression. Several studies indicate that where there is an over-supply of graduates for the new professional occupations, employers have already begun to either stipulate entry factors other than qualification or post graduate education irrespective of whether degree level education is required for performance in the job (Wilton et al Paper 7; Nabi 2003). These and other forms of credentialism and over-education reflect employer attempts to reconfigure graduate expectations downwards in response to their increasing numbers and availability. This being so any programme of research into employability needs to recognise that the scope of its message has grown to encapsulate graduate career entrants. Accordingly, providing insights into graduate experiences will, in part, rely on studying employers' attempt to shape employee notions of future employability from the start of post university employment.

Our final suggested research direction is more controversial. Rather than seeing management writings as entirely detached from the reality of the workplace, critical analysis could do well to explore the role that normative notions of employability play in determining how employees interpret their employment predicaments and opportunities. Potentially, there is much to understand about the extent to which the popularisation of employability impacts both on management practices and employee responses, especially where it promotes self development and personal responsibility.

And so, contrary to received views among critical writers, benefits would also accrue from a closer critical engagement with management writing and evidence that attempts to justify the general spreading of the message of self development. Since it remains doubtful whether the change to functional skills is so great that most employees need to learn new specialisms in order to be seen as future employable, it is disappointing that more has not been made of available evidence capable of challenging this account. Among the research to hand are studies confirming that many categories of functional skill are interchangeable across different occupations and even newly entered specialisms (Pearson, 1990). Equally too little has been made of the increase in customer service employment where existing administrative, service and organizational skills should be substantially transferable between quite widely differing organizations, sectors, and jobs.

In conclusion, critical assessments have been correct to assert that the main source of the employability idea has been its rhetorical purpose rather than in offering a practical response to uncertainty in the labour market. But they have been wrong to suggest that the significance of employability ends after its rhetorical purpose has been exposed. If employability represents another employer approach to individualise identification to the organization and the risks of employment, then its impact on social identity makes it deserving of sustained research attention.

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