List of Employability Skills

This book is not just about delivering a team-based innovation project or learning about innovation and Design Thinking – it is also about **developing and strengthening key employability skills**. We define employability as ‘a set of accomplishments – skills, personal attributes and understandings – that makes students more likely to gain employment and achieve success in the labour market, which benefits themselves, the labour market, society and the economy’ (Yorke & Knight, 2006). Employability is a dynamic concept that is linked to ability to develop from experiences. We focus on **seven employability skill areas**, which are listed in the figure below:



Figure 1:Employability Skill Areas

We describe each of these areas in the first chapter and refer to them throughout the book. Some students have asked us what kind of skills relate to what area. We responded to this request by creating this document which includes the definition of each skill area and then lists some more related skills and skill sets (listed in no particular order**)**. **This document is meant to work like a brainstorming exercise, giving you some ideas as to what is covered by each of the skill areas and helping you to be a bit more specific when you review your learning, develop a skills profile and/or work on job applications**. Please note, that this list is non-exhaustive and as such always preliminary. There is no way that one can identify *all* relevant skills for each of these areas – and some areas overlap. This is why we have left space for you to add a few more skills for each area.

Moreover, **employability skills are changing**. For example, what was understood to be teamwork in the 1980s may not be the same than what is common practice today. In the Digital Age and following the global pandemic the ways in which we work are changing ever more rapidly. This makes it all the more important to pay attention to what employability skills are particularly valued, and how we can excel at them.

This document will help you to reflect on what kind of skills you have already developed, and what skills may need further strengthening. **We recommend using the *Learning Review and Personal Profile Template* in conjunction with this document.**

All references we refer to in the text below can be looked up in the bibliography section of the textbook.

As always, we welcome any feedback or thoughts you may have on the seven skill areas and related employability skills! Feel free to start a discussion on our LinkedIn Group or just send us a message.

# 1. Innovation and Design Thinking

**Description:** This is a skill area that relates more broadly to the ability to identify problems and opportunities, and to develop and implement new solutions in a strategic way (WEF, 2020). Innovation management and Design Thinking skills can be applied in a range of different contexts. It is not just about developing new technologies and products. We also need innovation in services, operations and business models, among many other things! Design Thinking is a methodology for innovation that starts by generating empathy for people, particularly the people who will be using the solutions we’re looking to create. It focuses on really understanding a problem before jumping into ideas and solutions. Design Thinking includes techniques for generating and prioritising diverse ideas, some of which will be developed further, prototyped and tested using an iterative approach. Throughout the process, we need to be able to communicate in a clear and engaging way to convince others to invest in and implement our chosen idea(s). After all, if the idea remains just an idea, it’s not innovation! It will not come as a surprise that such a multi-stage innovation process needs to be managed. Therefore, innovation and Design Thinking draw upon (and lead to the development of) key organisational skills.

## Examples:

 Understanding different types of innovation

 Framing challenges and defining problems

 Methods for researching innovation challenges

 Making use of innovation management frameworks such as stage gate and agile

 Understanding, initiating and supporting processes and procedures for innovation management

 Innovation management and planning tools and related skills

 Programme and project management skills

 Design Thinking tools and techniques

 Creativity tools and techniques

 Stretching and expanding on ideas

 Capability assessment and development skills

 Understanding and evaluating risk

 Prototyping

 Commercial development

 Entrepreneurship

 Creative resilience

 Negotiation skills

 ‘Translation’ skills, that is, assisting different groups to communicate with each other

 Operating outside one’s comfort zone

 Navigating ambiguity

 Flexibility

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# 2. Collaboration and Teaming

**Description:** This about working ‘constructively with others on a task’ (Knight & Yorke, 2004, p. 8), very often working in diverse teams. It is one of the most synergistic of graduate skill areas. While it is often linked to leadership, we see it more closely aligned with emotional intelligence and being understanding and helpful on the job (aka soft skills!). ‘Teaming is a verb. It is a dynamic activity, not a bounded, static entity’ writes Professor Amy Edmondson in a blog post (2012). Teaming requires good organisational skills, for example relating to coordination and time management, as well as communication skills. It also requires a degree of reflexivity. While talking about collaboration is a nice thing to do – putting it into practice can be harder! Sometimes we need to take a step back and ask ourselves who we are in a given team; sometimes we find it difficult to relate to others in a positive way. Many of our students report that they have had little and/or negative previous experiences with teamwork, and they try to avoid it. In our view this is not a helpful strategy. Most graduate jobs involve a great deal of teamwork, so improving your skills in this area before entering the job market can make a huge difference to your career and your life more generally.

## Examples:

 Self-awareness and open-mindedness

 Acknowledging skills and contributions of team members

 Recognising complementarity and synergies in skill sets

 Respecting (and having empathy with) others, understanding where they are coming from

 Team communication, including active listening and checking for understanding

 Valuing and making use of diversity

 Collegiality and ‘soft skills’

 Seeking and giving input

 Organising teamwork and workflows

 Planning and managing effective meetings

 Using digital collaboration tools

 Taking responsibility (including for mistakes)

 Sharing credit

 Building trust

 Motivating others to progress towards a goal

 Assisting team members in achieving their goals

 Providing and receiving effective feedback

 Committing to shared goals

 Supporting group decisions (even if not in agreement)

 Being able to communicate problems and to ask for help

 Ability to deal with conflicts with self-awareness and a constructive attitude

 Leading by example

 Networking

 Coaching

 Understanding group dynamics

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# 3. Critical Thinking and Problem-Solving

**Description:** This refers to the ability to use available information as a basis to develop, evaluate and implement solutions (Hambur et al., 2002; WEF, 2020). Although this may well sound quite abstract, it involves tackling very practical problems! Complexity in the workplace and the wider world continues to increase, which is why we face increasingly ‘wicked’ problems. Often, we do not even know where to start, as the way we define a problem depends on our strategy for solving it. We need to hone our analytical thinking skills and be prepared to evaluate and question ‘given facts’, as well as being open and creative when addressing problems. Often, there is not just one optimal solution – this is why firms tell us they hire graduates – because they look at problems with fresh eyes, think critically and suggest new ideas. What is deemed best will depend on the perspective you adopt. So, while the application of a certain rationale and logic is important in analytic thinking, this skill area is equally about lateral thinking, creativity and, linking back to Design Thinking, empathy too.

## Examples:

 Analytical skills

 Critical ability

 Inferring, interpreting and explaining knowledge

 Ability to identify and evaluate underlying assumptions

 Self-awareness and self-regulation

 Open-mindedness and creativity

 Lateral thinking and thinking ‘outside the box’

 Checking for understanding

 Seeking clarity as to goals and overall rationale

 Maintaining clarity of focus

 Ability to make do/work around constraints

 Problem-solving

 Assisting others in problem-solving

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# 4. Commercial Awareness

**Description:** This relates to having a more fundamental understanding of priorities and practical implications. Commercial awareness (or business acumen) is one of the key skill gaps most frequently cited by employers in industry, who expect graduates to understand the need to balance costs with income and the importance to of satisfying customers (Archer & Davison, 2008). Commercial awareness also relates to numerical skills but ultimately it is more about having a practical sense for what is possible while maintaining an entrepreneurial spirit. This is not something one has or has not got – it is something we can all learn! Commercial awareness is often seen as relating to ‘business issues’ but of course it is also important for those who wish to work in government, public healthcare organisations, NGO’s and the so-called third or ‘voluntary’ sector. You may feel if you haven’t got any work experience, then you haven’t had chance to develop this – we disagree! While reading this book and completing the thinking exercises, you will recognise and build some of these skills.

## Examples:

 Awareness of the economic ‘big picture’

 Knowledge of industry trends and news

 Awareness of the history, structure and culture of an industry/sector/organisation

 Understanding what makes an industry/sector/organisation ‘tick’

 Understanding value and how it is delivered and measured by an industry/sector/organisation

 Analysis of mission and vision statements

 Analysis of cost factors and revenue steams

 Awareness of wider economic, social, political and cultural context (e.g., using PESTEL framework)

 Awareness of core values and related goals of an industry/sector/organisation

 Competitor analysis

 Identifying the core competencies of an organisation

 Ability to create and evaluate business cases to articulate sponsor and organisation value

 Ability to develop a value proposition statement to articular end user value

 Understanding the unique selling point or differentiation of an organisation/product/service

 Understanding and development of ‘wow factor’

 Critical analysis of strengths and weaknesses, opportunity and threats

 Stakeholder analysis

 Value chain analysis

 Understanding of how to evaluate performance

 Ability to link goals to performance indicators

 Understanding the risks of an operation or project and how to avoid or mediate them

 Budgeting

 Critical thinking with a view to value delivery and alignment between industry/sector/organisation and its (changing) environment

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# 5. Empathy and Communication

The ability to communicate effectively in different situations and with different audiences is key for virtually all jobs. This is another synergistic skill area where multiple studies have identified large satisfaction gaps between what employers expect and what graduates can provide (Jackson, 2010). In the literature, there is often an emphasis on the communication of outcomes in the form of presentations and reports. While we have included content on presentation skills in this book, in our experience wider communication skills, such as stakeholder engagement, team communication or meeting skills, are just as important. Graduates are also expected to know how to engage and manage themselves in a professional way with diverse internal and external organisations. There are also many practical challenges associated with interviews. So, we have included additional content that examines communication skills from a broader perspective.

## Examples:

 Open-mindedness

 Understanding your audience – their background, interests and objectives

 Respect

 Adapting your style of communication to your audience

 Adjusting volume or communication to audience and purpose

 Seeking cohesion and clarity in all communications

 Active listening

 Checking understanding

 Questioning assumptions

 Understanding body language

 Politeness

 Friendliness

 Confidence

 Responsiveness

 Knowing about communication channels and when and how to use them

 Managing meetings effectively

 Face-to-face communication

 Call handling

 Online communication

 Ability to minute meetings effectively

 Understanding group dynamics

 Ability to summarise communications and come to the point

 Maintaining purpose and focus when communicating

 Storytelling

 Tone of voice

 Ability to project voice and speak clearly

 Delivering presentations

 Public speaking

 Rhetoric

 Writing skills

 Visual communication skills

 Language skills

 Asking and inviting questions

 Gathering feedback

 Providing and following instructions

 Negotiating skills

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# 6. Resilience and Managing Change

Coping with challenges, changes or setbacks can be difficult (Griggs et al., 2018). While many degree programmes may be seen as an exercise in resilience in their own right, they also tend to be quite predictable. There are clear criteria and deadlines to be met. Most graduate jobs involve working in much more dynamic environments. Uncertainty, misunderstandings, rejections and setbacks can hit hard! Therefore, it is important to have developed the resilience and skills needed to address them with adaptability, foresight and professionalism. This links to our evidence that we can learn a lot from failure. While setbacks are always frustrating, we can all learn how to deal with them better and turn them into opportunities (well, perhaps not always but much more often than one might think).

## Examples:

 Accepting change and admitting to problems or failures – both individually and in teams

 Understanding your audience – their background, interests and objectives

 Dealing with frustration, failure and/or disappointment in a constructive way

 Believing in one’s ability to cope

 Accepting and processing negative feedback

 Ability to step back and reflect

 Analysing and reflecting on problems or failures – and learning from them

 Critical awareness and questioning of assumptions

 Self-awareness and self-control

 Active listening

 Accepting and processing negative emotions

 Kindness to oneself and others

 Activating positive emotions

 Patience

 Ability to convey difficult messages/negative feedback in a respectful way

 Self-confidence

 Seeking and accepting support – also on a personal level

 Communicating problems effectively

 Being helpful to others

 Transforming setbacks into opportunities

 Taking responsibility

 Ability to focus on the positives and what can be done

 Ability to motivate and encourage others

 Open-mindedness

 Problem-solving

 Cultivating a positive outlook and attitude

 Focus on what can be done

 Seeking meaning

 Negotiation skills

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# 7. Initiative and Active Learning

Given the fast pace at which economies are changing, we need to understand the implications for ‘both current and future problem-solving and decision-making’ (WEF, 2020, p. 153). Lifelong learning is a fundamental requirement to succeed in this environment. By the time we are studying in higher education, we often assume that we know how to learn. Yet, when we look at pedagogical research this is far from always the case. As automation and artificial intelligence are changing the very jobs we wish to succeed in, we do not just need to ensure digital fluency but also to develop new ways of learning. Such learning is not just about absorbing knowledge and passing exams but also about engaging with others and learning from experience. We need skills that enable us to engage, to analyse what we have done to succeed or fail, and to adapt so that we know how to do better. These skills won’t develop when we wait to be taught. They require us to take initiative and to reflect on who we are and what we want to do.

## Examples:

 Open-mindedness and brainstorming

 Showing initiative and a proactive attitude

 Making a conscious effort to learn

 Focussing on methods for active learning such as discussions, practice doing and teaching others

 Self-awareness

 Understanding one’s strengths and weaknesses

 Knowing about different ways of learning

 Improving one’s learning on a continuous basis

 Making time to reflect on one’s learning

 Journaling and other methods for documenting learning

 Note-taking and the processing notes

 Reading and annotating

 Ability to capture key learning points

 Seeking to discuss new insights and learning outcomes with others

 Teaching others

 Being clear about why one engages in education/learning

 Setting and pursuing realistic and clearly defined goals and milestones

 Ability to prioritise

 Strategies for overcoming procrastination

 Time management skills

 Ability to identify and acknowledge problems or mistakes and to learn from them

 Asking for help and support

 Acknowledging the strengths of others – and trying to learn from them

 Observing others and learning from their experience

 Asking questions

 Getting outside one’s comfort zone/trying something new

 Focussed listening

 Planning one’s career

 Evaluating progress

 Being open to change

 Being kind to oneself

 Flexibility

 Inviting feedback

 Seeking and engaging in mentoring

 Learning using different means (visual, verbal, text-based)

 Understanding how skills can be expanded and transferred

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# References

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