

Managerial expectations of graduate employability attributes: An empirical study



Authors:

Marida Steurer^{1,2}
Leoni Van der Vaart^{1,2}
Sebastiaan Rothmann¹

Affiliations:

¹Optentia Research Unit,
Faculty of Humanities,
North-West University,
Vanderbijlpark, South Africa

²Department of Industrial
Psychology and Human
Resource Management,
Faculty of Economic and
Management Sciences,
North-West University,
Vanderbijlpark, South Africa

Corresponding author:

Sebastiaan Rothmann,
ian@ianrothmann.com

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Orientation: A lack of employability attributes is often suggested as one of the main reasons for the existing new graduate supply–demand gap.

Research purpose: The study aimed to empirically explore managerial expectations of new graduate employability attributes and what managers are prepared to do to enable new graduates in this regard.

Motivation for the study: Not being able to find qualified candidates hampers productivity. In addition, it also limits new graduates' prospects of finding sustainable employment.

Research approach/design and method: This study is based on responses of 17 respondents from the North West, Gauteng and Northern Free State provinces of South Africa. Responses were obtained through a qualitative online survey. The researchers analysed the data using qualitative content analysis.

Main findings: Six main attributes were extracted from the data: Being self-determined (making choices and managing their own lives); harnessing knowledge and learning (using and developing knowledge and skills); having a positive attitude (solving problems and dealing with challenges and setbacks); believing in oneself (having humility and self-confidence); having good relationships with others (being sensitive towards the organisational culture and relating well to others) and managerial capacity building (managers' coaching and mentor roles that are critical to enable new graduates).

Practical/managerial implications: Understanding managerial expectations should guide industry, higher education institutions and government in developing evidence-based interventions focussing on the relevant aspects of new graduate employability attributes.

Contribution/value-add: The findings of this study provides an empirically grounded description of six broad new graduate attributes that managers value.

Keywords: employability; new graduate; managerial expectations; attributes; capability; qualitative descriptive design Introduction.

Introduction

Recruiting new employees is a matter of supply and demand, a matchmaking process between employer and employee. Employability attributes are generic and transferable rather than job-specific knowledge, skills and attitudes new graduates should exhibit to gain and retain sustainable employment (Coetzee & Engelbrecht, 2020; Osmani et al., 2019). Unfortunately, a mismatch often occurs between what employers expect from new graduates and what they feel these graduates offer (Allden et al., 2018). Such mismatch has negative consequences for the country, organisation and individual. Firstly, new graduates cannot be appointed because they do not possess the necessary attributes that employers want, contributing to unemployment and reduced economic growth (Botha, 2021; Edgell & Granter, 2019). Secondly, not having the attributes (e.g. knowledge and skills) employers want hampers organisational productivity, threatening the organisation's sustainability (Ybema et al., 2020). Thirdly, missing critical attributes limits new graduates' ability to proactively manage their career development in a changing world (Coetzee, 2012) and subsequently influences their prospects of finding sustainable employment and providing a long-term livelihood (Allden et al., 2018; Wilson-Clark & Saha, 2019).

Industry's quarrel with the suitability of new graduates is often less about their technical skills and more about their non-technical abilities (Alston et al., 2019; Walker & Fongwa, 2017) or employability attributes. Unless new graduates are equipped with attributes valued by the

industry, the mismatch will be sustained, and their employment prospects will remain poor (Wilson-Clark & Saha, 2019).

Many studies exist in which researchers investigated employability attributes from the perspective of higher education institutions (HEIs) (Barton et al., 2017; Pažur Aničić & Divjak, 2020), government (Hazelkorn & Gibson, 2019) and graduates (Espinoza & McGinn, 2018; Gedye & Beaumont, 2018). Although various calls have been made for graduate employability research from a managerial perspective (Chinzer & Russo, 2018; McCowan et al., 2016), using a qualitative approach (Liebenberg et al., 2015; Puad & Desa, 2020), few researchers (Allden et al., 2018; Salleh et al., 2016; see Steurer et al., 2022 for an overview) have heeded this call. Furthermore, those who have heeded this call focused on developed countries (Allden et al., 2018; McCowan et al., 2016; Schull et al., 2021).

The limited research on employability attributes from a managerial perspective and a non-WEIRD (western, educated, industrialised, rich and democratic) country (specifically) is unfortunate for several reasons. Firstly, the *Skills Development Act* (SDA) tasks South African employers with the responsibility of bridging the existing skills gap by providing graduates with opportunities to gain work experience and meaningful upskilling to ensure sustainable employment (*Skills Development Act*, 1998). This upskilling should be based on the needs of (hiring) managers. Secondly, qualitative research is fundamentally concerned with gaining insight into and understanding a phenomenon (Silverman, 2020). Therefore, a qualitative approach is warranted when limited information exists regarding a phenomenon. Thirdly, it is important to realise that South Africa faces far greater diversity than most developed countries and has striking regional differences from its counterparts in sub-Saharan Africa (Walker & Fongwa, 2017). As a result of these differences, unique attributes may be required.

Finally, according to a systematic review (Williams et al., 2016), most of the employability research in education focused on individual-level explanations. Such research focused on employability by identifying sought-after attributes that facilitate employment. Williams et al. (2016) pointed out that in these studies, employability is often seen as the individual's responsibility and ends when the individual secures a job. However, Santos (2020) pointed out that employability among graduates is also highly dependent on the context in which it occurs (Santos, 2020). To have a lasting effect, sustainable employment is key, and in line with the capability approach, graduates' ability and willingness to continue employment also depend on the enablement of these employability attributes in a specific context, for example, the specific workplace (Van der Klink et al., 2016). From this perspective, employability is a shared responsibility (between graduates and employers) and continues well into employment. Hence, it is also important to investigate what managers are willing to do to enable the use and development of attributes.

It is necessary to empirically identify graduate employability attributes from a managerial perspective to expand the knowledge base and address the shortcomings mentioned here. This study addresses two gaps in the new graduate employability literature. The first gap concerns the lack of scientific information on managers' expectations concerning attributes associated with new graduate employability in a South African context. The second gap in the employability literature concerns information about what managers are willing to do to enable new graduates to acquire these employability attributes. The results could guide the developmental focus on meaningful attributes to enhance individual and organisational growth. Increased awareness could also enable new graduate's agency, facilitating an adaptive and proactive approach to their careers (Van der Heijden & De Vos, 2015). This could improve their employment prospects and sustain their employability (Chinzer & Russo, 2018; Coetzee, 2012).

Literature review

Contextualising graduate employability

New graduates are individuals who have completed a qualification at an HEI before transitioning into the labour market for the first time (South African Graduate Employers Association, 2020). Cheng et al. (2022) classify employability definitions into three groups: individual (referring to the capabilities offered by the individual), labour market (referring to the relative demands posed by the labour market) and duality (referring to a combination of what the individual can offer and what the labour market demands or enable). From the perspective of the individual, Knight and Yorke (2003) view employability as: '... a psychosocial construct that represents the career-related attributes that promote adaptive cognition, behaviour and affect, and increase one's suitability for appropriate and sustained employment opportunities' (p. 7). From the duality perspective, Roos (2018) applies his definition of employability to graduates as follows:

Employability of new graduates, despite their limited experience of graduate work, is the possession of appropriate graduate employability attributes and their convincing presentation to employers who expect those attributes, to gain meaningful employment, thereby benefiting employers and new graduates. (p. 67)

These two definitions augment each other as Roos' definition emphasises gaining meaningful employment, whilst Knight and York's definition focuses on sustained employability. This study will build on the synergy of these two perspectives.

For this study, *attributes* are equivalent to competencies and include knowledge, skills and attitudes (Boyatzis, 1982; Roos, 2018). These attributes go beyond technical subjects and also relate to professional practice. Graduate attributes must be conceptualised broadly and not viewed as job specific as they transcend industry and organisational borders (Fernández-Espínola et al., 2020; Fugate et al., 2021). Instead, the focus should be on underlying essential human capabilities that transcend specific skill sets, that is, capabilities independent

of context. Skills are becoming less central to creating value that will discern a company and meet employee needs (Hagel et al., 2019). Therefore, skill sets alone are no longer adequate for building meaningful, long-term customer and employer relationships (Hagel et al., 2019). For example, in addition to skills, values (an element of capabilities) also play a critical role (Van der Klink et al., 2016).

This argument stems from the accelerating pace of change that the industry is facing. The Fourth Industrial Revolution impacts customer expectations and the rate at which technology replaces human skills (Dolce et al., 2020; Hagel et al., 2019). In addition, there is also a fundamental transformation in the industry's operations because of political and societal disruptions (Fernández-Espínola et al., 2020), such as the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic. Therefore, talent can no longer be defined as before, as many of the future roles of employees are unknown (Brown et al., 2017; Fernández-Espínola et al., 2020).

Researchers (De Wet & Rothmann, 2022; Van der Klink, 2019; Van der Klink et al., 2016) argue that it is critical to shift the focus from skill sets to capabilities as they propose that employees are driven by the need to realise essential values for sustainable employment. They base their argument on Amartya Sen's capability approach (Robertson & Picard, 2021). According to Van der Klink et al. (2016):

[...A]n individual's sustainable employability is determined by how he or she succeeds in converting resources into capabilities, and subsequently into work functioning, in such a way that values such as security, recognition and meaning are met. (pp. 71–72)

According to the capability approach, work should allow employees to actualise essential values. In doing so, work values are translated into capability sets that explain important work outcomes (e.g. engagement and well-being) (Abma et al., 2016; De Wet & Rothmann, 2022; Van der Klink, 2019). For example, Abma et al. (2016) identified seven work values: (1) the use of knowledge and skills; (2) the development of knowledge and skills; (3) involvement in important decisions; (4) building and maintaining meaningful contacts at work; (5) setting goals; (6) having a good income and (7) contributing to something valuable. More recently, De Wet and Rothmann (2022) and Van Casteren et al. (2021) demonstrated the relevance of these seven work values.

Managerial perspectives on graduate employability

Graduate employability is not only important but also complex. As a result of globalisation and technological advances, the work environment is dynamic (Al-Shehab et al., 2021; Dolce et al., 2020). Together with social and (geo) political disruptions (Fernández-Espínola et al., 2020), workforce requirements are continuously evolving (Baird & Parayitam, 2019). These changing requirements inform hiring managers' decisions. More specifically, their values, needs and preferences set the tone for the labour market's demand for employability attributes or capabilities. These values,

needs and preferences are aimed at reaching organisational goals such as enhancing productivity, increasing profitability and contributing to the greater good (Chinzer & Russo, 2018; Potgieter et al., 2016) while ensuring the well-being of employees (Van der Klink et al., 2016). Roos (2018) and Chadha and Toner (2017) emphasise that new graduates need to be aware of what attributes industry values to gain meaningful employment, which aligns with Cheng et al.'s (2022) view that new graduates should be prepared for the challenges that they will face in the workplace.

It is essential to focus on hiring managers' expectations of graduate employability attributes as they are vested in aligning new graduate performance with the overall company strategy (Othman et al., 2019). Managers' performance is influenced by the people reporting to them. To meet the company's overall goals and objectives, they need to plan and grasp what they require new graduates to do and be (Ellis, 2018). Managers are also involved in the day-to-day management of employees, which implies that they have a hands-on approach. Furthermore, managers are well positioned to facilitate new graduates' realisation of their capability sets. A scoping review conducted by Steurer et al. (2022) identified four categories of graduate employability attributes as seen by managers: (1) personal attributes (e.g. adaptability, coping with stress, cultural sensitivity, enthusiasm and willingness to learn); interpersonal attributes (e.g. language and communication skills and leadership), workplace skills (e.g. reading comprehension, planning and organising) and applied knowledge attributes (e.g. decision-making, problem-solving and professional competence).

The aims of this study were twofold. The first aim was to explore managers' expectations concerning attributes associated with graduate employability in a South African context. The second aim was to study what managers are willing to do to enable new graduates to acquire these attributes.

Research methodology

Research design

This study followed a qualitative descriptive survey approach to offer rich descriptions of the phenomenon. According to Sandelowski (2000), this approach is especially suitable when little is known about the phenomenon (Rainbow et al., 2021). The researcher strived to study the phenomenon in its natural state as far as possible and therefore did not have pre-selected or manipulated categories (Sandelowski, 2000).

Participants

The target population consisted of managers and supervisors from the Northern Free State, Gauteng and the North West provinces of South Africa who had extensive experience dealing with graduated, first-time labour-market entrants. To qualify as a participant, an individual had to have operated in a managerial or supervisory role for a minimum of 5 years with at least monthly contact sessions with graduates. As a result of logistical challenges and the constraints of including

all managers and supervisors meeting the inclusion criteria, participants were sourced by applying two non-probability sampling methods consecutively. Initially, participants were selected by applying purposive sampling, recommended for qualitative descriptive studies and deemed ideal for identifying and selecting information-rich cases (Sandelowski, 2000), followed by snowball sampling. Snowball sampling was used with hard-to-reach cases to target a larger and more diverse sample. Hence, the first author sent (from her network) invitations to participate to qualifying individuals. Once prospective participants' eligibility was established, qualifying and non-qualifying individuals were asked for referrals of potential participants within their networks. Snowball sampling is advantageous in the case of hard-to-reach populations (Handcock & Gile, 2011), as was the case in this study. Supplementing the initial purposive sampling approach with snowball sampling was ideal for this study as it countered the limitations of the first author's network and addressed the challenge of reaching qualifying individuals by drawing on the richness of the networks of other professionals.

All participants were either senior ($n = 5$) or top ($n = 12$) management level in private organisations. Of the 17 participants, 12 were male and five were female. The highest qualifications of the participants were: Diploma ($n = 1$), Bachelor's degree ($n = 6$), Honour's degree ($n = 6$), Master's degree ($n = 2$) and PhD ($n = 1$). Participants represented companies of various sizes: Less than 50 employees ($n = 7$), between 50 and 250 employees ($n = 4$) and more than 250 employees ($n = 6$). They also represented various sectors: Education, training and development ($n = 4$); media, information and communication technologies ($n = 2$); chemical industries ($n = 1$); finance and accounting services ($n = 3$); manufacturing, engineering and related services ($n = 3$); wholesale and retail ($n = 1$) and services ($n = 3$). Participants were based in Gauteng, North West and the Northern Free State provinces of South Africa. These three provinces are geographically close with strong economic ties. Including participants from these three areas might have resulted from the snowball sampling approach.

Data collection procedure

Data collection occurred during September and October 2021 via Survey Monkey's online application. An initial pilot study was carried out with four participants. The responses of these participants were not included in the final analysis. The qualitative online survey, consisting of open-ended questions, was revised twice to address clarity and duration issues, as Braun et al. (2021) recommended. Finally, an invitation was emailed to 27 potential respondents who qualified to participate (based on the inclusion criteria). Potential respondents were requested to share the invitation with individuals in their networks. A total of 23 individuals replied to the invitation and agreed to participate. Four potential participants withdrew because of work demands and one withdrew because of personal reasons. Seventeen consent forms and survey responses were returned before the set deadline. Data saturation was achieved at around 13

responses using open-ended questions and member-checking through follow-up emails. The researcher collected four more responses to confirm that no new information emerged. The duration of the data collection was 2 months (September-October 2021). Given the controversies surrounding data saturation, we also reflected on the criteria (e.g. the complexity of the questions being studied and the variation of the participants) Morse (2020) provided to determine whether we had enough data to understand the phenomenon.

Participants were requested to respond to the following questions: (1) What do you regard as essential attributes (knowledge, skills and attitudes) for new graduates entering the labour market? (2) When you have two suitable candidates in front of you who are technically equally skilled or knowledgeable, which attributes (i.e. competencies, knowledge and skills) would you be looking for to choose between the two candidates? (3) Which attributes do you think new graduates lack most? Explain why you think this is a problem in practice. (4) Where can new graduates obtain these attributes before entering the formal labour market? (5) What are the most important behaviours and standards new graduates should value when they start working for your organisation? (6) What are you and/or your organisation willing to do to enable new graduates to reach the valued behaviours and standards in the previous question?

Research procedure

The Economic and Management Sciences Ethics Committee at the North-West University provided ethics approval for the research project (NWU-00813-19-A4). The project complied with ethical guidelines such as voluntary participation, informed consent and confidentiality. The first author initially sent an email invitation to prospective participants, briefly explaining the research's purpose and voluntary nature. Recipients were also requested to circulate the invitation to other prospective participants. Within 7 days of the initial email, the first author followed up on the invitation to participate. Prospective participants could contact the first author to indicate their interest in participating and to request more information if need be. The first author replied with a personal email explaining the benefits and risks of participation, who would have access to data, what would happen to the results and how feedback would be given. Each participant was required to complete a consent form before participation.

Data analysis

Responses were analysed for qualitative content using the coding strategies developed by Saldaña (2021). The research questions, as well as the questions posed in the survey, guided the coding process. The process involved data reduction, coding and decoding analytic processes to analyse and interpret each qualitative data form. Coding terminology and procedures were utilised as suggested by Saldaña (2021). Descriptive, process, and in vivo codes were created inductively (data driven) and deductively (theory driven).

The data were analysed deductively through structural coding per interview questions. After that, a second coding cycle was performed inductively to identify the thematic issues, looking beyond the interview questions at how the themes manifest in the broader sense. Because of the qualitative descriptive nature of this study, the researcher refers to the 'creation' of themes instead of using the term 'emerging' themes. This semantic nuance hints at the researcher's active role in this process (Braun & Clarke, 2022; Saldaña, 2021). A list of 160 codes was created. The list was reduced to 28 codes and six thematic code groups or categories using ATLAS.ti (version 9). Direct quotes were used in an illustrative, rather than analytic, manner to provide examples of analytic insights (Braun & Clarke, 2022).

Trustworthiness

The researchers employed various strategies to ensure data quality and integrity. The study's credibility was addressed by applying qualitative description as an appropriate and well-recognised research method (Sandelowski, 2000), together with purposive and snowball sampling. Member-checking further assisted in addressing the credibility of the findings. Confirmability concerns the objectivity of the results (Schurink et al., 2011). Respondents' words from the questionnaire and follow-up emails were coded. The researcher collaborated with an independent external coder who is an industrial and organisational psychology expert. The first author also discussed the results with peers (in human resource management) and the co-authors to ensure the confirmability of the data analysis. The researcher employed a fourfold strategy through member-checking, peer discussions, supervisor feedback and involving a co-coder to counteract the threat of inconsistency and increase the study's dependability (Shenton, 2004). Direct quotes from the participants' responses were used to describe the findings to demonstrate that the 'findings were grounded in the evidence' (Levitt et al., 2018, p. 36). A combination of the Consolidated Criteria for Reporting Qualitative Studies (COREQ) (Tong et al., 2007) and the Journal Article Reporting Standards for Qualitative Research (JARS-Qual) (Levitt et al., 2018) was followed to ensure comprehensive and objective reporting.

Ethical considerations

Ethical clearance was obtained from an institution for higher education. Ethical approval was granted by the Economic and Management Sciences Research Ethics Committee (EMSREC) at North-West University (reference no.: NWU-00813-19-A4).

Results

Each theme is described in terms of its sub-themes. Because of the interrelated nature of these constructs, some of the sub-themes relate to more than one of the overall themes. Quotes are included from the empirical data to substantiate the arguments made. Data extracts are used in an illustrative (as opposed to an analytic) manner (Braun & Clarke, 2022).

As per the earlier analysis description, a comprehensive code list of 160 codes was created. One hundred and seventy-six quotations were created from the interview data, which implies that a thorough examination was conducted inductively and deductively. Before creating themes, the codes were grouped into categories and then themed accordingly. Table 1 summarises the themes (higher-level attributes) and sub-themes (more specific behaviours, knowledge and skills).

Theme 1: Being self-determined

The way self-determination manifested in the data concerned aspirations and a realistic goal orientation. Graduates should focus on setting clear goals, aligning efforts to achieve them and acknowledging obstacles while remaining hopeful. Managers look for new graduates whose goals and aspirations align with the company and find it problematic when this aspect is lacking.

'Graduates should have goals. These goals should include themselves but also encompass the organisation's goals. They should understand that it will not fall from the sky but will be achieved through hard work and dedication. Of course, there will be obstacles [*challenges*] in the way, but not to give up hope when [*at first*] they do not succeed.' (Respondent 17, Education Training and Development sector, 17 years experience with new graduates)

'Goal orientated: A graduate starting fresh must be able to set goals for self-improvement and help promote the employer's goals.' (Respondent 10, Services sector, 10 years experience with new graduates)

The stance new graduates take towards self-development also reflects their self-determination. Respondents repeatedly stated that they expect new graduates to take responsibility for their development. To this end, managers also expect new graduates to be self-motivated and committed and find it problematic when this aspect is lacking.

TABLE 1: Summary of themes and sub-themes.

Themes	Sub-themes
Being self-determined	Aspirations and (realistic) goal orientation Positive attitude towards learning Self-development skills Ability to align personal and company goals Commitment
Harnessing knowledge and learning	Meaningful job knowledge Positive learning attitude Willingness to learn Life-long learning attitude Humility
Having a positive attitude	Positive attitude towards life Positive work attitude Humility Resilience Strong work ethic Hope
Believing in oneself	Self-worth Confidence Realistic self-image Humility
Having good relationships with others	Sensitivity towards organisational culture Social skills Emotional intelligence Teamwork Good communication skills (Self-)Leadership skills
Managerial capacity building	Industry exposure pre-employment Mentorship and coaching Company culture, morals and shadowing

'We will give them responsibility, and they must accept it and make sure they take responsibility. We include them in all kinds of jobs. We give them training and will even allow them to make mistakes. That is one of the best ways of learning, but you do not learn from mistakes if you do not take responsibility for making and rectifying it.' (Respondent 8, Manufacturing Engineering and related services sector, 5 years experience with new graduates)

'Personal or internal drive, ambition and personal goals achieved... Ability to adapt and develop his personal skills.' (Respondent 2, Manufacturing Engineering and related services sector, 30 years experience with new graduates)

'Self-motivation: Can they get themselves going? Will they start tasks promptly and get them done on time? Do they believe in themselves enough to be prepared to take the initiative and see a project through?' (Respondent 14, Services sector, 21 years experience with new graduates)

'Graduates must be able and willing to continue with self-development.' (Respondent 10, Services sector, 10 years experience with new graduates)

'Low self-motivation. Often new graduates do not stick with what they have started. Also, they need someone to hold their hand to get started. They should take more initiative without being asked to do so.' (Respondent 17, Education Training and Development sector, 17 years experience with new graduates)

Managers feel that new graduates who purposefully try to gain practical exposure before joining the formal labour market are better off than new graduates who do not engage in such activities. In addition, managers value the self-determination of new graduates who demonstrate this drive.

'Just get into the world of work. Work as a student, get involved in community projects (even if it does not pay) and become part of work teams (even outside of your industry). Just get out in the work environment and start learning about people and the world of work.' (Respondent 8, Manufacturing Engineering and related services sector, 5 years experience with new graduates)

'I am a big believer in holiday and part-time work for students, apprenticeship programs and career expos.' (Respondent 10, Services sector, 10 years experience with new graduates)

'[...]Jobs like waitressing, receptionist, administrative support, even childminding. It improves employability because it could create a sense of responsibility, understanding of how work is structured, opportunity to develop the skills.' (Respondent 16, Services sector, 15 years experience with new graduates)

'Work as a student or intern on actual projects, even for free, at a company that promotes working in teams and with an agile approach. Requirement changes will be handled, and the new graduate can learn through experience and from the team.' (Respondent 1, Media Information and Communication technologies sector, 5 years experience with new graduates)

Being self-determined also means having a personal drive towards what one values most. Knowing what one works towards and translating that into goals and actions catches the eye of managers as they value that in new graduates:

'Ambition and personal goals achieved. His values vs the company values ... The opportunities in the company vs his personal career goals.' (Respondent 2, Manufacturing Engineering and related services sector, 30 years experience with new graduates)

'Willing to put in more than required, which demonstrates hunger and dedication.' (Respondent 3, Finance and Accounting Services sector, 15 years experience with new graduates)

'Rising above their circumstances and achieving success through dedication and passion for what they do. The right attitude. ...having a mindset of owning their circumstances, thriving in their daily work and having hope for the future. Taking action, not being hopeless.' (Respondent 4, Finance and Accounting Services sector, 25 years experience with new graduates)

'I would like to see that a graduate pursues the following "value" that the work could provide: [1] Potential realisation – the graduate should strive to know and realise their potential in the context of the work that they are employed for, by wanting to learn, apply their learning and convert it into capabilities and functionalities; [2] Productivity – the graduate should strive to understand what is meant by productivity in the context of their work and orientate themselves towards delivering productive work; [3] Quality – the graduate should strive to understand what is meant with quality of work in the context of their work and orientate themselves towards delivering high-quality work'. (Respondent 16, Services sector, 15 years experience with new graduates)

Theme 2: Harnessing knowledge and learning

Identifying new graduates who sincerely value harnessing knowledge and learning is a high priority amongst managers. This inclination among graduates is measured against their willingness to learn, their positive attitude towards personal development, their ability to apply theory to practice and the extent to which they emerge themselves in their discipline. In addition, new graduates should be modest and teachable. Not only should they be critical listeners, eagerly absorbing knowledge and wisdom from more experienced colleagues and mentors, but they should also apply critical thinking, make sense of situations and understand the impact of various scenarios:

'Although you have graduated, you will not know everything. Every day is a school day. We keep on learning.' (Respondent 10, Services sector, 10 years experience with new graduates)

'Theoretical knowledge is good to have, and after some time, they will be able to mix the practical and theoretical knowledge ... Universities can teach this knowledge, but they (have to have an inherent willingness to work and exceed ... must be willing to work hard, to do what it takes to grow in their jobs.' (Respondent 8, Manufacturing Engineering and related services sector, 5 years experience with new graduates)

'... eager to learn the processes in the company and understand how his role and responsibility add value in the organisation.' (Respondent 2, Manufacturing Engineering and related services sector, 30 years experience with new graduates)

'Willingness to learn – is the person trainable or not? It is much easier to work with someone willing and eager to learn than with someone that is not. It also overlaps with humility, knowing you

do not know everything when you step out of university and is eager to fill the gaps continuously.' (Respondent 5, Finance and Accounting Services sector, 26 years experience with new graduates)

'The average graduate also needs lots of guidance to solve problems instead of creating solutions themselves.' (Respondent 7, Media Information and Communication technologies sector, 15 years experience with new graduates)

Theme 3: Having a positive attitude

Managers highly appreciate a positive outlook on life and work. The attitude managers look for in new graduates pertains to their resilience and how they deal with setbacks. It also refers to humility and the absence of a sense of entitlement, that is, confidence without arrogance:

'I hire for attitude. Skills can be taught.' (Respondent 15, Education Training and Development sector, 26 years experience with new graduates)

'The right attitude. Growing valuable skills, having a mindset of owning their circumstances, thriving in their daily work and having hope for the future.' (Respondent 4, Finance and Accounting Services sector, 25 years experience with new graduates)

'[I look for...] attitude – an attitude of hard work, learning, and solving problems. The candidate will realise he is there to add value to the company's bottom line. I will try to check out the one who thinks he is doing us a favour by joining the company.' (Respondent 8, Manufacturing Engineering and related services sector, 5 years experience with new graduates)

'...willingness to learn irrespective of whether tasks are perceived as menial [*being humble*]. Willing to put in more than required demonstrates hunger and dedication.' (Respondent 3, Finance and Accounting Services sector, 15 years experience with new graduates)

'Attitude ranks very high. The prospective person presents himself with confidence, but without arrogance.' (Respondent 17, Education Training and Development sector, 17 years experience with new graduates)

'Not believing that certain tasks are below you. Dealing properly with lower-level staff, e.g., cleaners or general workers.' (Respondent 5, Finance and Accounting Services sector, 26 years experience with new graduates)

Theme 4: Believing in oneself

New graduates must assure managers that they believe in their self-worth and are confident in what they bring to the table. Likewise, managers need new graduates to be able to conduct themselves with confidence, among others. However, managers expect graduates to find a balance between confidence and arrogance; thus, graduates should have a realistic dose of confidence mixed with humility:

'Self-belief, confidence: New graduates often come across as insecure and then it is hard for me to believe in a candidate if they do not seem to have confidence in themselves. You have to be able to sell yourself without coming across as arrogant. A healthy and realistic self-image goes a long way.' (Respondent 5, Finance and Accounting Services sector, 26 years experience with new graduates)

'Having self-confidence, being a team player but can still work on their own, having passion [*enthusiasm and positivity*] and being driven.' (Respondent 9, Wholesale and Retail sector, 13 years experience with new graduates)

'Be confident in your everyday approach.' (Respondent 10, Services sector, 10 years experience with new graduates)

Theme 5: Having good relationships with others

Managers feel responsible for recruiting new graduates who fit in with their organisation's culture. The organisational culture may be considered the collective way of being, thinking and acting among a group of people with mutual expectations (Serpa, 2016).

'[...E]very organisation has a unique culture... therefore certain personalities will fit better than others.' (Respondent 5, Finance and Accounting Services sector, 26 years experience with new graduates)

'A graduate must be able to form part of the team quickly and promote shared goals.' (Respondent 10, Services sector, 10 years experience with new graduates)

'How they present themselves in the interview process, how they interact with others, do they come over as agreeable. Will they fit into the team, and will they be able to deal appropriately with clients?' (Respondent 14, Services sector, 21 years experience with new graduates)

'The individual builds the company, and the company builds the individual.' (Respondent 8, Manufacturing Engineering and related services sector, 5 years experience with new graduates)

Social skills are vital to managers, but graduates sometimes lack these skills. This encapsulates teamwork (i.e. working towards a common goal), communication and emotional intelligence (i.e. interpersonal sensitivity, an appreciation of differences and resilience). These constructs are interrelated to a great extent. Social skills are significantly impacted by one's communication skills and emotional intelligence. The term *communication* includes all forms of communication (e.g. verbal, non-verbal, technological and listening).

'Being part of a team, adapting your behaviour to fit in with others to reach a common goal. Dealing with conflict in a constructive way.' (Respondent 4, Finance and Accounting Services sector, 25 years experience with new graduates)

'Being able to navigate complex relationships and appreciate the diversity of thought'. New graduates 'cannot explain their needs and interact with colleagues and management.' (Respondent 3, Finance and Accounting Services sector, 15 years experience with new graduates)

'I look for a team player that can operate as part of a diverse group [*of colleagues*] and deliver to a diverse group of stakeholders.' (Respondent 15, Education Training and Development sector, 26 years experience with new graduates)

'Emotional intelligence. You must be able to manage your emotions to overcome obstacles, have empathy with others, but most of all can participate in a team.' (Respondent 17, Education Training and Development sector, 17 years experience with new graduates)

'Respect your colleagues and the company's assets and clients. Be on time for meetings and appointments. Communicate issues or ask for help earlier rather than later... Embrace change.' (Respondent 1, Media Information and Communication technologies sector, 5 years experience with new graduates)

'Clear communication – starts with good command of English as a business language, ability to speak up and respond to questions thoughtfully and provide feedback, ability to write emails with good language structuring. Pro-active communication is also important, i.e., to ask questions when unsure or not having enough clarity on a task.' (Respondent 16, Services sector, 15 years experience with new graduates)

New graduates must have (self-)leadership skills, such as critical thinking and problem-solving skills, time management, adaptability and professional conduct. According to Peel (2005), professional conduct is the interface between professionalism in theory and practice. In addition, managers want to see new graduates taking responsibility and ownership of tasks:

'Leadership, being responsible, believing in own convictions, but being able to adapt when necessary and taking people along on the journey. Somebody like that would add value to a company. [and u]nderstanding that critical thinking is a mindset rather than merely a "skill" can help it become a habit.' (Respondent 12, Education Training and Development sector, 9 years experience with new graduates)

'Be adaptable to changes in the work environment and changes in project requirements. Have problem-solving and logical thinking skills and a passion for applying them.' (Respondent 1, Media Information and Communication technologies sector, 5 years experience with new graduates)

'Professionalism, Good listening skills, Good work ethic [including being on time], ability to meet deadlines, Respectful, Good communication skills [written and verbal]. Wanting to succeed in life.' (Respondent 11, Education Training and Development sector, 7 years experience with new graduates)

'Critical Thinker, being able to make sense of a situation, understanding the impact of various options and finding solutions.' (Respondent 12, Education Training and Development sector, 9 years experience with new graduates)

'Time-management skill – knowing how to align time spent to what needs to be delivered in terms of output. The ability to prioritise different tasks without supervisor guidance also affects time management ... taking the initiative.' (Respondent 16, Services sector, 15 years experience with new graduates)

'Problem-solving skills. Using astute judgement.' (Respondent 3, Finance and Accounting Services sector, 15 years experience with new graduates)

'Sense of ownership – I have experienced that many times I must drive an instruction continuously instead of the graduate was taking ownership of the task at hand and report on progress daily or weekly.' (Respondent 14, Services sector, 21 years experience with new graduates)

Theme 6: Managerial capacity-building

This theme speaks to capacity building and the empowerment of new graduates. It refers to the role managers are prepared to play in enabling new graduates to realise valued behaviour.

Managers are prepared to show support in various ways. Although formal and in-house training was mentioned, mentoring and coaching remain the most common means of addressing the possible shortfall in lacking attributes. Managers engage supervisors and peers in the mentoring and coaching process and play a vital role in the induction of new graduates into the organisational culture:

'Shadowing and spending time at a relevant institution. Being assigned to an experienced mentor.' (Respondent 15, Education Training and Development sector, 26 years experience with new graduates)

'I believe in an open-door policy combined with mentorships. A small-business owner needs to be an employer, leader, friend, councillor, trainer and mentor to ensure the graduate has all the tools to make a success of his or her opportunity.' (Respondent 15, Education Training and Development sector, 26 years experience with new graduates)

'Induction ... and formal coaching sessions to ensure they adapt quickly. We offer our graduates a coach from the previous year's graduate pool of employees so they have someone in their peer group who can assist them in their orientation. In addition, we reward our graduates through small financial incentives to grow their skills portfolio [technical skills] and will introduce a "kudos" system for soft skills training to entrench the culture of our business.' (Respondent 3, Finance and Accounting Services sector, 15 years experience with new graduates)

'Proper induction and introduce the graduate to the business culture. We also believe in mentorship to ensure that the grad adapts to the business's vision. We closely monitor them and give continuous feedback.' (Respondent 15, Education Training and Development sector, 26 years experience with new graduates)

'We offer an internship, with hands-on guidance on work execution and combining it with coaching and mentoring on required behaviours.' (Respondent 16, Services sector, 15 years experience with new graduates)

Some managers are getting involved in capacity-building, even before students graduate, through vocational work opportunities, internships, mentoring and even employing less conventional methods such as board games:

'We employ interns and allow students to work with our teams on actual projects to give them the experience of proper behaviour in our workplace. They are trained and eventually given more and more responsibility. Being part of the team, they attend the meetings, communicate and handle any changes the team faces.' (Respondent 1, Media Information and Communication technologies sector, 5 years experience with new graduates)

'We provide vacation work and parallel working opportunities while the students still study. We create a fostering learning environment alongside senior staff members. We include students and new graduates in big projects, give in-house training where necessary and host board game nights to integrate them socially. This creates better communication channels and gives juniors greater confidence to engage in the work environment.' (Respondent 7, Media Information and Communication technologies sector, 15 years experience with new graduates)

Discussion

The aim of this study was twofold. Firstly, the researcher set out to determine what expectations managers have regarding new graduate employability attributes and, secondly, what managers are prepared to do to assist new graduates in mastering these valued attributes. Managers regard employability attributes as vital for new graduates' job success. With the reality of an overcrowded labour market, managers tend to differentiate between equally qualified candidates based on their outstanding employability attributes (Anderson & Tomlinson, 2021). The following overarching attributes were created: Being self-determined; harnessing knowledge and learning; having a positive attitude; believing in oneself; having good relationships with others and organisational capacity building. Considering the aims of this study, five themes concerned broad attributes, while one theme concerned what managers can do to promote new graduate employability.

Being self-determined entails a new graduate's ability to make choices and manage their own life; that is, being the master of their destiny. It includes intrinsic motivation, which refers to engaging in activities because it is pleasurable or meaningful (Ryan & Deci, 2017). Dondi et al. (2021) also identified self-motivation as a distinct element of talent (DELTA) for future-proof employment in the 21st century. New graduates need to have aspirations that guide the goals they set for themselves, but managers value those graduates whose goals and aspirations align with those of the organisation. Goal setting is motivational (Locke & Latham, 1990) and is considered one of the seven essential work values for sustainable employability (SE) (De Wet & Rothmann, 2022; Van der Klink, 2019; Van der Klink et al., 2016). New graduates who exert effort to gain work exposure tend to impress managers with the self-determination demonstrated through their actions. Managers are looking for ambition and dedication to hard work. Individual drive and commitment to their goals are further indicators of self-determination.

Being able to harness knowledge and learning makes new graduates attractive to employers. Having genuine self-determination predisposes a person to learn and an openness to new information. Using and developing one's knowledge in the workplace is an important SE indicator (Abma et al., 2016; De Wet & Rothmann, 2022). Managers do not expect new graduates to be perfect; they expect them to learn and to make mistakes along the way, but at the same time to be mature enough to learn from mistakes and to be responsible for seeing their projects through. New graduates need to be lifelong learners who make an impression on managers with their eagerness to grow and apply what they have learned. This notion might be taken for granted by academics but might not be as straightforward amongst people in routine jobs or work environments that do not require much innovation. It also pertains to new graduates trying to find out what the job entails, gather knowledge about the organisation and then try to align their goals with those

of the organisation. New graduates would exhibit these attributes if they valued the use of knowledge and skills, development of knowledge and skills and involvement in important decisions. This implies applying knowledge and skills (De Wet & Rothmann, 2022; Van der Klink et al., 2016). This notion is backed by Potgieter et al.'s (2016) core attitudinal stances that emphasise scholarship and lifelong learning. An openness to learn from others also touches on humility as new graduates need a teachable spirit. It reflects how new graduates approach learning and how they deal with diversity, change and seniority.

New graduates are expected to have a positive attitude towards life and work. Attitude is fundamental to every aspect of an individual's life. The positive attitude that managers are after in new graduates pertains to their resilience and how they deal with challenges, setbacks and problem-solving. It implies humility and the absence of a sense of entitlement. A positive attitude increases learning agility. A graduate's positive attitude towards hard work indicates their work ethic, which is vital to managers. A positive attitude (e.g. energy, passion, optimism, grit and perseverance) was also identified as a DELTA (Dondi et al., 2021).

Humility and self-belief are not mutually exclusive, as some might think. Managers are being put off by insecurity but look for humility in new graduates. New graduates need to believe in their self-worth and be confident about their possible contributions. Having a healthy and realistic self-image can be a great asset. Conducting yourself with confidence exhumes self-belief. Self-confidence can become an enabler for motivation and the eventual development of life goals (Johnson, 2019), which in turn talks to Van der Klink et al.'s (2016) work value of goal setting. Believing in oneself and the goals you have set also reflects in the resilience with which challenges are met. This notion drives new graduates not only to reach their goals but also to passionately work towards that which they value or find meaningful, which resonates with Van der Klink et al.'s (2016) work value of contributing to something valuable.

Individuals' self-perceptions impact how they integrate with others and operate within teams (Abbas & Nawaz, 2019). Good relationships with others are crucial as collaboration towards shared goals is vital in an organisation. These interpersonal variables include attributes that enable the development of relationships, effective teamwork and mobilisation of resources (Dondi et al., 2021; Steurer et al., 2022). Managers are looking for new graduates with the technical skills and 'social instincts' that would make them productive and effective team members (Mursion, 2021, p. 2). New graduates must be team players and be equipped to handle workplace diversity regarding demographics and thought (see Steurer et al., 2022). Coronavirus disease 2019 recently complicated this as 'remote work was making it easier to avoid difficult conversations and leaving critical issues like diversity, equity and inclusion poorly addressed' (Mursion, 2021, p. 6). On the flip side, new graduates also

need to recognise highly dependent teams where all group members are not contributing as they should.

Leadership is regarded as a vital graduate attribute (see also the findings of Steurer et al., 2022). The intention of more than 30% of graduate appointments is to join a leadership development programme (South African Graduate Employers Association, 2020). Maintaining good relationships with others impacts how one gives and receives critique and deals with conflict. Communication in all its forms is crucial in building and maintaining healthy, sustainable relationships with others. This corresponds with Van der Klink's (2016) work value, building and maintaining meaningful contacts at work. Professional networking is one of the main predictors of employability and a strong catalyst for learning as learning and development are seen as a highly social process (Rumjaun & Narod, 2020; Van der Heijden et al., 2009). The challenge recently intensified as remote work drastically reduced opportunities to practice in-person people skills. Teamwork, coaching, brainstorming and interaction with others have always been important elements of new graduates' development and social integration (Mursion, 2021).

Managers have a unique role in enabling new graduates to realise capability sets. Apart from formal external and in-house training, managers can also play an enabling role through coaching and mentorship. Through mentoring, coaching and shadowing, new graduates are given the ultimate example of applying knowledge and theory in practice, often in the heat of the moment and within the confines of unique organisational constraints. Peer learning is less time-consuming and costly than engaging a supervisor for the same job. Managers could also create networking opportunities for new graduates as learning and development ultimately happens within a social context (Van der Heijden et al., 2009). To this end, managers should ensure that new graduates are appropriately inducted and merged into the company culture.

Organisations can provide opportunities for new graduates to gain vocational work exposure even before they formally join the labour market. This can be done through various initiatives such as student work, internships and work-integrated learning. The theme of capacity building by managers is in line with the SE model (Van der Klink et al., 2016). The SE model suggests that graduate capability results from the value they attach to beings and doings and the extent to which they are enabled and can achieve what they value. However, it is critical not to have a single capability but rather a set of capabilities.

In achieving its aim, the study makes several contributions. Firstly, it contributes to employability literature in a non-WEIRD country by providing a list of employability attributes of new graduates as perceived by managers in private organisations. Secondly, it highlights the ways in which organisations are prepared to enhance the SE

of new graduates, thereby translating it into a shared responsibility.

Practical implications

The study's findings are significant in providing an empirically grounded description of what managers value in new graduate attributes and how they are prepared to enable new graduates to realise their capability sets. Understanding managerial expectations could guide the development of evidence-based interventions focusing on the relevant aspects of new graduate employability attributes. This could guide industry efforts in training and development and recruiting new graduates. In addition, new graduates could apply this evidence-based knowledge to proactively prepare themselves for the new world of work, attracting managers' attention and ultimately increasing the likelihood of SE. Higher education institutions and government can also take note of these results when formulating curricula and strategies to enhance new graduates' employability.

Limitations and further study

Data were gathered through qualitative surveys with follow-up emails. Because of the sample size, the emic nature of this study and the limitations of qualitative research, the findings may only be transferable to the employability of new graduates in the Gauteng, North West and Northern Free State provinces of South Africa. A quantitative approach should be followed in future studies to study whether employability attributes in other organisations situated in different provinces in South Africa. Future research could use semi-structured interviews (as opposed to an online qualitative survey) to deepen our understanding of the attributes and capabilities of graduates. Future studies could also focus on SE from the perspective of the capability approach (Gloss et al., 2017; Van der Klink et al., 2016).

Conclusion

The study explored managerial opinions of graduate employability attributes. The results highlighted the importance of new graduates' self-determination, their eagerness to harness knowledge and learning, having a positive attitude towards life, believing in themselves and having good relationships with others. Managers can play a vital role in preparing new graduates further in the workplace for sustainable employment by creating the right environment to convert the resources at their disposal into capabilities. This would empower new graduates and increase their agency and freedom to choose the outcomes they value most to create SE.

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Data availability

The data are openly available at: https://osf.io/hfb2a/?view_only=cdc2eb1f035c421da7363464514222a0

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