



International  
Labour  
Office

# SKILLS FOR EMPLOYMENT

## *Policy Brief*

# ENHANCING YOUTH EMPLOYABILITY: THE IMPORTANCE OF CORE WORK SKILLS

Countries across the world are seeking strategies to improve both the employment prospects of young men and women and the productivity of enterprises. A foundation of core skills is one of the key constituent factors of employability, along with access to education, availability of training opportunities, and the motivation, ability and support to take advantage of opportunities for continuous learning. These skills are critical for both workers and the enterprises that employ them, enabling workers to attain decent work and manage change, and enabling enterprises to adopt new technologies and enter new markets.

This policy brief aims to assist key stakeholders to better understand what the core skills for employability are, why they are important, and how they can be delivered, attained and recognized. It illustrates various ways of integrating employability skills into core academic content and vocational training.

Innovative use of information and communications technologies (ICT), improvements to informal apprenticeship systems and targeted interventions directed at the specific hurdles facing disadvantaged young women and men provide greater opportunities to incorporate core work skills into technical training.<sup>1</sup>

## What are core skills for employability?

Core employability skills build upon and strengthen the skills developed through basic education; the technical skills needed for specific occupations or to perform specific tasks or duties (such as nursing, accounting, using technology or driving a forklift); and professional/personal attributes such as honesty, reliability, punctuality and loyalty. (For a summary of the different types of skills needed for the world of work, see table 1.)

Core work skills enable individuals to constantly acquire and apply new knowledge and skills; they are also critical to life-long learning. Various agencies and organizations have given different labels to these skills, ranging from “key competencies” to “soft skills”, “transferable skills” or “essential skills”. The ILO uses the terms “core work skills” or “core skills for employability”.

### Box 1. The ILO definition of employability skills

The ILO defines employability as relating to “portable competencies and qualifications that enhance an individual’s capacity to make use of the education and training opportunities available in order to secure and retain decent work, to progress within the enterprise and between jobs, and to cope with changing technology and labour market conditions” (ILO, 2004, Para. 1.2(d)). “Individuals are most employable when they have broad-based education and training, basic and portable high-level skills, including teamwork, problem solving, information and communications technology (ICT) and communication and language skills... This combination of skills enables them to adapt to changes in the world of work.” (ILO 2005, Para. 33, Footnote 1)

<sup>1</sup>This policy brief is derived from ILO, *Enhancing youth employability: What? Why? and How? Guide to core work skills*, May 2013, [http://www.ilo.org/skills/areas/skills-for-youth-employment/WCMS\\_213452/lang-en/index.htm](http://www.ilo.org/skills/areas/skills-for-youth-employment/WCMS_213452/lang-en/index.htm).

The ILO supports skills development to improve the employability of workers, the productivity of enterprises and the inclusiveness of economic growth.

Table 1. Skills for the world of work

Type	Description
Basic/foundation	The levels of literacy and numeracy necessary to get work that will pay enough to meet daily needs. As their name implies, these skills are also a prerequisite for continuing in education and training, and for acquiring the transferable technical and vocational skills that enhance the prospect of getting better jobs.
Vocational or technical	Specialized skills, knowledge or know-how needed to perform specific duties or tasks.
Professional/personal	Individual attributes relevant to work such as honesty, integrity, reliability, work ethic.
Core work skills	The abilities to learn and adapt; to read, write and compute competently; to listen and communicate effectively; to think creatively; to solve problems independently; to manage oneself at work; to interact with co-workers; to work in teams or groups; to handle basic technology; and to lead effectively as well as follow supervision.

Enterprise surveys are used to determine which skills employers require. Certain work skills are identified in most such surveys, and these are listed in table 2, grouped into four broad skill categories: learning to learn; communication; teamwork; and problem-solving. Clearly the relevance of any particular skill or group of skills will depend to some extent on the type of employment (self-employment, formal or informal), the economic sector in which the enterprise operates, and the size and nature of the enterprise.

- *Learning to learn* covers the knowledge, skills, attitudes and aptitudes which enable individuals to set, plan and reach their own learning goals and become independent autonomous learners. These skills equip young people for lifelong learning.
- *Communication* covers the abilities to gain understanding from others – by listening, reading and observation, using both formal and informal, oral and written means – and to put across ideas clearly and effectively.
- *Teamwork* covers the abilities necessary to operate smoothly and efficiently within a group, including those related to both cooperation and leadership.
- *Problem-solving* covers the analytical skills required to evaluate information or situations and decide on the most appropriate ways of addressing problems. These skills include awareness of long-term consequences of actions taken and the capacity to assess and adapt plans of action.

Box 2. Do developed and developing countries need different core work skills?

Most research on skills needs has been restricted to the formal economy and developed countries. Yet 90 per cent of the world's young people live in developing regions, and most of them face a future of irregular and informal employment. Enterprise surveys conducted in a mix of sectors across sub-Saharan Africa and South-East Asia (two-thirds of enterprises surveyed were SMEs) indicate that there is a significant convergence between the skills considered important in developed and developing countries. The skills required by employers in both the formal and informal economies of these developing regions (in addition to basic and technical skills) include openness to learning; ability to communicate, both orally and in writing; good work habits (punctuality, application, etc.); the capacity for teamwork; personal integrity; leadership; entrepreneurialism; and the capacity for analytical and critical thinking.

Source: Burnett and Jayaram (2012).

Table 2. Core skills for employability: An overview of skills and abilities

Broad skill category	Core work skills/abilities
Learning to learn	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• being willing to learn</li><li>• using learning techniques to acquire and apply new knowledge and skills</li><li>• working safely</li><li>• pursuing independent learning</li><li>• taking responsibility for own learning</li><li>• thinking abstractly</li><li>• organizing, processing and holding information</li><li>• interpreting and communicating information</li><li>• conducting systematic inquiry, following through to find answers</li><li>• using time effectively and efficiently without sacrificing quality</li><li>• selecting the best approach for tasks</li><li>• beginning, following through and completing tasks</li><li>• being adaptable</li></ul>
Communication	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• reading competently</li><li>• reading, understanding and using materials, including graphs, charts and displays</li><li>• understanding and speaking the language in which the business is conducted</li><li>• writing effectively in the languages in which the business is conducted</li><li>• writing to the needs of an audience</li><li>• listening and communicating effectively</li><li>• listening to understand and learn</li><li>• using numeracy effectively</li><li>• articulating own ideas and vision</li></ul>
Teamwork	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• managing oneself at work</li><li>• working in teams or groups</li><li>• interacting with co-workers</li><li>• respecting the thoughts and opinions of others in the group</li><li>• working within the culture of the group</li><li>• understanding and contributing to the organization's goals</li><li>• planning and making decisions with others and supporting the outcomes</li><li>• taking accountability for actions</li><li>• building partnerships and coordinating a variety of experiences</li><li>• working towards group consensus in decision-making</li><li>• valuing others' input</li><li>• accepting feedback</li><li>• resolving conflicts</li><li>• coaching, mentoring and giving feedback</li><li>• leading effectively</li><li>• mobilizing a group for high performance</li></ul>
Problem-solving	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• thinking creatively</li><li>• solving problems independently</li><li>• testing assumptions</li><li>• identifying problems</li><li>• taking the context of data and circumstances into account</li><li>• identifying and suggesting new ideas to get the job done (initiative)</li><li>• collecting, analysing and organizing information (planning and organization)</li><li>• planning and managing time, money and other resources to achieve goals</li></ul>

### Why are core skills for employability important?

Skills have become increasingly important in the globalized economy. Vocational and technical skills are essential, but employers are seeking applicants with more than these, and to date this need is a long way from fully met. A report by the McKinsey organization, drawing on survey data from nine countries, found that less than half of employers (43 per cent) were able to find the skills they needed in entry-level workers.<sup>2</sup>

What employers are looking for are the core skills for employability identified in the preceding section. These skills benefit those newly embarking on the labour market, existing employees and employers. For the individual, they improve the ability to get and keep a job, to move around in the labour market and to engage in lifelong learning. Learning skills enable one to manage one's own time and get the most out of it, whether in work or studying. Teamwork and communication skills show one how to get the best out of working with others. Problem-solving helps individuals to develop a systematic approach to tackling the inevitable challenges they will encounter in their studies, work and everyday life.

For the employer, these core skills mean employees better able to respond more readily to changes in the workplace, reducing the time taken for a product to be conceptualized, manufactured, distributed and sold. Workers equipped with these skills will be able to learn more quickly and perform more effectively, allowing enterprises to develop more innovative and flexible workplaces, where employees can offer novel ideas, and to adjust more quickly to technological change and organizational restructuring.

#### Box 3. What do employers want?

“Employers want assurances that young people applying for jobs have at least strong foundation skills and can deploy their knowledge to solve problems, take the initiative and communicate with team members, rather than just follow prescribed routines. These ... skills are not taught from a textbook, but can be acquired through good quality education. Yet employers often indicate that these skills are lacking in new recruits to the labour market.”

(UNESCO, 2012, p. 16)

The bottom line is that employers are looking for job applicants who not only have technical skills that can be applied in the workplace, but who also can communicate effectively, including with customers; can work in teams, with good interpersonal skills; can solve problems; have good ICT skills; are willing and able to learn; and are flexible in their approach to work.

<sup>2</sup>McKinsey, 2012. The nine countries surveyed were Brazil, Germany, India, Mexico, Morocco, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, the United Kingdom and the United States.

### Policy challenges

The major policy challenges in this area revolve around four broad issues:

1. Securing the first job and then being able to move on in the labour market, both of which require core work skills as well as the technical skills to perform specific tasks.
2. The need to improve access to innovative, good-quality secondary education and training, a prime site for the transmission of core work skills, and to ensure that more young people take part in and complete their courses.
3. Opening up opportunities to acquire core employability skills to disadvantaged young people, including those who have dropped out of school or never attended, and those who are working in the informal economy under poor conditions. These young women and men often lack not only access to training, but also the professional or personal role models who could nurture essential employability skills.
4. Obtaining recognition of the core employability skills acquired outside the workplace, through regular activities in the home, the community, the classroom or recreationally. These skills are not typically certified, so how are they to become recognized?

We now address these issues in turn, in each case setting out some of the key messages and examples of good practice in addressing them, in both formal and informal systems.

### Getting a job and remaining active in the labour market

#### Box 4. Responsibilities for skills development: Tripartite agreement

**Governments** have primary responsibility for:

- education;
- pre-employment training, core skills;
- training the unemployed and people with special needs.

The **social partners** play a significant role in:

- further training;
- providing work experience.

**Individuals** need to make use of opportunities for education, training and lifelong learning.

Source: ILO 2004 (preamble, Paras 4(b), 6(1) and 10(a))

#### Key messages:

- i) The best way to acquire core skills for employability is on the job. But many employers are no longer prepared to take on new recruits without demonstrated ability in these skills. Therefore, both individuals and education and training systems must do more to attain and deliver these transferable skills.
- ii) Secondary school is an important channel through which young people acquire skills that improve their chances of getting good jobs. High-quality secondary education and vocational training that cater for the widest possible range of abilities, interests and backgrounds are vital to set young people on the path to the world of work, as well as to give countries the educated workforce they need to compete in today's technologically driven world. Innovative ways need to be found to integrate the teaching of these skills into the transmission of core academic content.

#### Good practice:

- Developing curricula that evolve through continuous dialogue with employers to align education and training with business needs and local realities and also to keep teachers up to date about workplace practices.
- A project-based learning approach that simulates the workplace so that young people gain real-world, hands-on skills.
- Mentoring programmes that link students with professionals or young workers, to give students access to the world of work, a clear understanding of what it means to work in the formal sector and the opportunity to practise communication skills.
- Interactive teaching, through which instructors facilitate exercises that provide opportunities for experience, practice, reinforcement and reflection.
- Using on-the-job training, work experience, internships and work-study programmes as opportunities to coach young people in workplace settings.
- Altering aspects of the classroom setting to simulate the workplace, for example by setting up practice firms and workshops, and using experiential learning and role play.

### Innovative, good-quality secondary education and training for all

#### Key messages:

- i) Curricula at lower secondary school level should offer both basic education and good-quality training in relevant skills. Upper secondary curricula should provide a balance between vocational and technical skills, including ICT, and core work skills.
- ii) To improve access to good jobs for disadvantaged young people in particular, secondary education has to be made more equitable and more inclusive, offering the widest possible range of opportunities to accommodate young people of differing abilities, interests and backgrounds.
- iii) Ways need to be found to overcome the main obstacles to attendance, namely: cost; distance from home to school; lack of language skills and learning materials; and lack of understanding of the relevance of formal education.

#### Good practice:

Access to, participation in and completion of secondary education and training are all enhanced by a system that:

- provides detailed information on occupational requirements to students and their families and friends;
- coordinates strong community-based and personalized support;
- assigns an academic adviser to each student who is responsible for supporting and monitoring that individual's progress;
- expands geographical outreach, using such means as distance learning;
- makes it affordable;
- improves the quality of primary-level education;
- reforms policies that deter girls' participation;
- makes it more relevant to the world of work;
- tailors skills to the needs of the local market;
- offers technical and vocational training;
- offers an effective and flexible curriculum;
- uses hands-on learning techniques and modular course design;
- brings the classroom to the workplace;
- brings the workplace to the classroom.



For those who dropped out of school or never attended, second-chance opportunities at formal education can be successful if they:

- focus on the holistic development of the individual;
- provide a learning environment which is safe and structured but also challenging;
- offer a flexible and dynamic programme of integrated general education, vocational training and work experience;
- are participant-centred and participant-led, offering genuine opportunity for open and honest feedback between trainer and participants;
- emphasize achievement rather than failure;
- use appropriate assessment and certification;
- are flexible in respect of curriculum timing;
- offer courses of variable duration on the basis of student needs;
- operate in close proximity to students' homes;
- assign little or no homework;
- keep financial costs to a minimum, both for students and for their parents or guardians;
- involve families and communities in the learning process.

**High-quality apprenticeship programmes:**

- promote the active participation and support of key stakeholders (young people; employers; trade unions; training and education institutions and vocational schools; national, regional and local governments);
- work within and subject to regulation under a legal framework;
- are based on a contractual relationship between the firm and the apprentice that guarantees decent working conditions;
- ensure continuing relevance to the needs of the labour market;
- offer good career guidance to apprentices;
- through collaboration with the social partners, promote the recognition and validation of training through national bodies (commissions, committees) that certify qualifications and competences.

**Reaching out to disadvantaged young women and men**

Particular effort needs to be directed towards meeting the needs of young people in the informal economy and/or in rural areas, and those who are otherwise marginalized from formal training systems.

**Box 5: What do we mean by disadvantage?**

**Disadvantage** may refer to any or all of the following:

- income poverty;
- lack of experience in and poor understanding of the formal job market;
- discrimination on the basis of gender, disability, race, ethnicity or other factors;
- geographical isolation, with poor access to quality education and job opportunities.

**Key messages:**

- i) Young people need to complete at least the basic education cycle, which is essential for further skills training and prospects of getting a decent job.
- ii) Active labour market training programmes targeted at disadvantaged young people have been increasingly used with positive impact in the short, medium and long term.
- iii) Innovative approaches to skills acquisition that combine training with opportunities to work and earn are essential.
- iv) Support services including literacy and remedial education, vocational and job-readiness training, job-search assistance, and career guidance and counselling can also help young people to find their way into work.

**Good practice:**

Appropriate active labour market programmes (ALMPs):

- integrate training in technical skills with reading, writing and basic mathematics, creative thinking skills, and core employability skills;
- use a project-based learning approach that simulates the workplace, offering learning through practical instruction and experience rather than theory and textbooks, so that young people gain real-world, hands-on skills;
- offer a system of social support that includes links between families and social workers or psychologists to help address personal struggles and build self-esteem;
- emphasize building each individual's capacity for employment rather than simply focusing on finding jobs for young people;
- explicitly integrate gender awareness activities into the curriculum;
- work in partnership with the private sector to identify skills in high demand and formulate curricula accordingly;
- schedule regular meetings with young people and their parents to reinforce family support for participation;
- provide sustained and consistent guidance to teachers and staff through project and pedagogical coordinators.

**Good use of ICT to teach core skills to the marginalized:**

- offers an online learning programme for specialized technologies using open-source software;
- provides e-mentoring that links students with professionals to give students access to professional networks, a clear understanding of what it means to work in the formal sector, and the opportunity to practise professional communications skills using ICT tools;
- develops digital classrooms to enable training to be offered on a greater scale and at lower cost per trainee, once the initial investment in hardware and software is made;
- combines civic and digital education to enable young people to understand the challenges that face their communities and empower them to work together and with other community groups to solve them;
- ensures that newly qualified teachers have the appropriate skills and practical experience to foster core work skills using digital media.

**Recognition of core work skills**

**Key messages:**

- i) Public employment services (PES), as the bodies that connect jobseekers with employers, have an important role to play in helping applicants to show that they can meet employers' skills needs.
- ii) PES have a particular responsibility to provide assistance to young jobseekers, especially new graduates, school leavers and out-of-school and unemployed young people, in making the transition to the world of work.
- iii) The likelihood of achieving a good match between the employer's vacancy and the jobseeker's skills is strongly influenced by the quality of the data on vacancies. PES therefore need to work with employers to ensure that vacancies are described as precisely as possible, and to improve their job-matching software so that it is better at capturing competencies in core skills as well as technical and vocational skills.
- iv) Existing jobs and vacancies need to be described not only in terms of occupational and technical skills, but also in terms of core skills and competencies.
- v) In many developing countries PES are non-existent or poorly resourced. These countries face the particular challenge – in addition to financing constraints – of finding ways to reach out to the informal economy and unregistered jobseekers.

**Good practice:**

Companies and PES work together to:

- raise awareness about schemes that offer recognition and certification of core skills, as well as guidance and counselling, and help jobseekers to analyse their own skills better;
- break down barriers and widen access to education for a variety of audiences, including vulnerable groups, through accreditation of prior learning and flexible pathways;
- develop indicators to measure levels of core employability skills;
- create, adapt and develop new assessment methods and tools to capture and reflect the core work skills and competences of learners;
- ensure that common terminology is used through the use of occupational classification systems;
- clearly identify the required skills for occupations.

To reach out to the informal economy and unregistered jobseekers, PES can:

- make it easier to gain access to their services, for example by reducing the distances people have to travel by opening more local outlets, ensuring non-discriminatory access to services, including opening hours compatible with typical working hours in the informal economy, and undertaking proactive outreach into the informal economy;
- improve the capacity of local PES to make best use of their knowledge of local labour markets and to motivate both unemployed and informally employed workers to find jobs in the formal economy.

To facilitate the recognition of skills gained outside formal education and training systems, PES can:

- use advisers who help jobseekers to demonstrate their core work skills by putting together a functional résumé or curriculum vitae, that is, one in a form designed for those who do not have a great deal of work or other relevant experience;
- work with accredited training institutions to gain automatic recognition by employers of certificates that verify the core work skills which are increasingly important to employers, thereby also supporting further investment in training.

## Key ILO resources

- International Labour Office (ILO). 2013. *Enhancing youth employability: What? Why? and How? Guide to core work skills* (Geneva). [http://www.ilo.org/skills/areas/skills-for-youth-employment/WCMS\\_213452/lang--en/index.htm](http://www.ilo.org/skills/areas/skills-for-youth-employment/WCMS_213452/lang--en/index.htm)
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## Other references

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- McKinsey. 2012. *Education to employment: Designing a system that works* (McKinsey Center for Government).
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For more information on links between education and training and productive and decent work, visit the **Global Public-Private Knowledge Sharing Platform on Skills for Employment**, initiated by the ILO and benefiting from the support and collaboration of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and the World Bank. <http://www.skillsforemployment.org/KSP/en/index.htm>

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