The Employability Factor: Coaching for success (0204)

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Abstract

In the current occupational climate, graduates not only need technical and functional knowledge but an increasingly wide range of "other skills" to enhance their employability prospects. This presents the challenge for HE organisations; how do they ensure their graduates develop these skills?

There is currently an ongoing discussion around the most appropriate pedagogy to be utilised in employability skills development. Given the increasing popularity of coaching in the arena of learning and development, the authors of this paper considered it worthwhile to utilise a coaching intervention as a vehicle for the development of employability skills.

In this paper, the authors describe the pilot study carried out at Aberdeen Business School (ABS) which involved using a group coaching intervention as a vehicle for employability skills development. The participants comprised a group of management students nearing the end of their period of post graduate study.

Background/Context/Theory

Recent developments in Higher Education (HE) have seen a strong emphasis on developing employability skills and ensuring that graduates are ready for the workplace (Pegg et al 2012; Moore and Morton 2015). Political, economic and environmental demands have further exacerbated the drive to equip students with these skills (Pegg et al 2012) thus giving universities the opportunity to distinguish themselves in the market place. A further incentive for this agenda has arisen from business and industry requirements as employers have indicated that they value generic employability skills more than specific technical or occupational skills (Cotton 2001; Cassidy 2006). Educational policy has subsequently sought to ensure that the graduate population are equipped with the transferrable skills necessary for transition into the workplace (Moore and Morton 2015).

A number of approaches to the development of graduate employability skills have been suggested. Cassidy (2006) has emphasised the importance of peer assessment in the development of employability skills whereas other authors (Cox and King 2006; Rao 2015) point to more traditional methods including training, work placements, group work and simulations. There is however consensus that employability will consist of several key elements including discipline based knowledge and skills, career management, workplace awareness and other generic skills (Cassidy 2006; Pool and Sewell 2007; Maxwell 2009). Whilst a number of employability models have been suggested (Blackmore et al 2016), there has been a shift towards a more holistic view of graduate "attributes" that includes personal qualities, emotional intelligence, self-efficacy and "people skills" (Bailey and Stevenson, 2015). Additionally, there have been suggestions from the Higher Education Academy (HEA) that HE organisations should enhance the quality of their pedagogical approaches to graduate employability through consideration of the context of delivery as well as the construction and design of employability programmes (2016).

In recent years, and as a result of the complex demands of the contemporary workplace, coaching has emerged as one of the alternatives to the more traditional forms of learning. This has resulted in an increased focus on line managers delivering coaching (CIPD, 2012). There are a number of

definitions but Whitmore's (2002) explanation that it is about 'unlocking a person's potential to maximise their own performance, it is helping them to learn rather than teaching them' (p8) resonated with the authors particularly in relation to employability skills development. McNicoll (2015) highlights how peer coaching groups 'combine the benefits of one-to-one coaching with the power of peer-to-peer learning' (p14). She also identifies that as well as receiving coaching themselves, group coaching participants develop the tools required for management conversations.

In the light of this, the authors, from Aberdeen Business School (ABS), decided to pilot an employability skills development initiative using group coaching as a vehicle; the aim centring on the development of a student-centred pedagogy to enhance employability.

Methodology

A coaching intervention was designed to take place during a two week period. This action research project was to focus on the development of employability skills among a postgraduate, management student cohort. Participants were voluntary and were fully briefed in the research aim. It was proposed that the outcomes of the research would inform future module development as well as teaching and learning approaches in this area.

During a briefing session participants were asked to attend two workshops which focused on utilising peer and group coaching to enhance student attributes. Eight volunteers (all of whom were international students) opted to attend the intervention and were organised into two coaching groups. The first workshop concentrated on student self- awareness and the identification of personal attributes whereas the second focused on the models of professional competence, the employment market and organisational needs. Each session was designed as a seminar which included self, peer and group coaching activities: Participants were introduced to the CLEAR coaching model (Hawkins 1980, cited by Grant, 2011) to support their coaching interventions. This model was selected due to its dominance in the field of coaching (Grant, 2011) and the simplicity of its design.

Following the intervention, participants were asked to complete a questionnaire which contained a series of open-ended questions designed to prompt reflection on their group coaching experience. The data was analysed and interpreted using a thematic approach.

Results

The findings indicated that students had transitioned from a "shallow" and "one-off" perception of employability to a deeper understanding (Cassidy 2006; Pool and Sewell 2007; Maxwell 2009). Participants commented that initially they had focused on what they had achieved in previous work situations whereas following the coaching intervention they had a broader conceptualisation. This included a deeper understanding of the continual nature and importance of employability skills across an individual's career. In addition students indicated that they now recognised a broader range of attributes to be associated with employment skills including behavioural and personality characteristics as well as professional interests.   This demonstrates a move from the more traditional conceptualisations of employability to more current definitions (Blackmore et al, 2016; Moore and Morton, 2015; Cassidy, 2006; Cotton, 2001).

The coaching activities were, on the whole, well received. Respondents described how the exercises enabled them to recognise how they could learn from peers and that they, as students, could coach others (CIPD, 2012; McNicoll, 2015). They majority of participants believed they had developed coaching skills to some extent; one commented, "I can now do a better job of coaching others". However there was some indication that one or two individuals found coaching challenging both in

the new perspectives they developed about self and in the pressure felt when working with a coach. Despite this, there was a generally positive response to the peer group activities which were perceived as more favourable than traditional pedagogical approaches (Whitmore, 2002; McNicoll, 2015).

There was a consensus among participants that self-awareness had been enhanced. Students indicated that they were "more self-aware", "had a clearer understanding of myself" and that the course had "opened me up to skills that I did not know I possessed". This included an awareness of both their personal strengths and areas for development. In addition the findings suggest that some students had developed a clearer understanding of employer requirements (Cotton 2001; Cassidy 2006). One commented, "I used to believe one could only guess what employers wanted ...I now know that assumption is wrong." There was also recognition of the importance of "softer" transferable skills to employers (Moore and Morton, 2015; Blackmore et al, 2016)

Implications

What emerged from this pilot was that participants' knowledge of self, employability and coaching skills had been enhanced through the use of a group coaching pedagogy.

The next step involves, for the forthcoming year, the inclusion of similar group coaching interventions to develop employability skills to a wider range of management students in ABS.

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