



Employer perspectives on the importance of help-seeking as a key skill of higher education graduates

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Abstract

This study investigates the importance of help-seeking skills among higher education graduates as perceived by employers. Through semi-structured interviews with 16 employers across various industries in Australia, the research identifies help-seeking as a critical skill that enhances employability. An employee demonstrates effective help-seeking abilities when they appropriately request assistance to accomplish a task at work. Our research explores the nuance of what employers have in mind when they conceptualise help-seeking in their context. Help-seeking is underpinned by communication, self-efficacy, and problem-solving skills. The study suggests practical strategies for higher education institutions to incorporate help-seeking training into their curricula, as part of preparing students for complex work environments.

Keywords

help-seeking skills, employability, higher education, graduate expectations, communication skills, resilience.

Introduction

In this article, we outline findings generated as an outcome of interviews with the local employers of graduates from Victoria University, Melbourne, Australia regarding the skills junior employees should demonstrate. In particular, the research explored employers' definitions and contextualising of the capabilities required by employees of their organisations.

We found that traditional skills such as communication, self-efficacy, and problem-solving were sought after (Puustinen & Rouet, 2009). However, our participants also wanted help-seeking capabilities on top of these skills. An employee exhibits good help-seeking skills when they seek 'the right amount' of assistance to achieve a work task (Martín-Arbós et al., 2021). This is typically represented by the employee having drawn on the correct resources, from the perspective of an employer, to solve a problem. Perhaps our finding is not surprising, many researchers have outlined the fraught environment university graduates enter (see Cook, 2022 for an overview). Seevaratnam et al. (2023, p. 182) describe the demand for an "innovative and collaborative workforce capable of critical thinking and creative problem solving". A graduate with well-developed help-seeking skills will

be better placed in an employment context. In this article, we present an exploration of help-seeking from the employer's standpoint.

The relationship between universities and industry is a contested area and often politicised, some arguing for universities to be strongly aligned with the needs of industry while others argue that universities should be free of commercial constraints (see Winterton & Turner, 2019 for an overview). The position of the authors of this article is that we serve our students and graduates and want to prepare them so that they are enabled to engage with industry on their terms because they hold well-tuned employability skills. Tomlinson (2021) claims that employers have a 'tacit cultural script', which is a sometimes-unspoken shared understanding of acceptable ways of doing things. In this article, we explore the intricacies and expectations of the script to enable our students as much as we can. As Delva et al. (2021) report that employability is not about quantity, just doing more, but activities aligned with the 'doxa' (conventions) of a specific field. Employability as a characteristic is often regarded as an individual activity demonstrated by one person presenting their skills, education and experience for review by a potential employer (Delva et al., 2021). The writers of this paper see employability as a partnership and wish to learn more about our stakeholders' needs to design programs that enable students to flourish in difficult times and also serve employers.

Within the paper we first review the background of our research. An explanation of our methodological approach is presented next, highlighting its grounding in interpretivism as the basis for the analysis of interview data. We next explain the perspectives of employers regarding the requirements they seek from employees. Using data from our participants, we explain that help-seeking is regarded as an improved form of problem-solving, self-efficacy and resilience. Communication skills also underpin help-seeking. Importantly, help-seeking is highly context specific, the skills expected in one industry or workplace will be different from those in another environment. It is possible that help-seeking is more sought after in resource-tight environments. Employers look for help-seeking signals from their potential staff. The final part of this article outlines the implications from our findings regarding help-seeking and the ways universities can work with students to boost their help-seeking skills.

Previous research

If an individual has employability skills, they are more likely to find work opportunities and successfully maintain employment positions, both during and post-study (Selvaratnam, 2021). Cook (2022) outlines the injustice, and capitalist and colonist judgments dominating the work environments students could enter. It is incumbent on universities to prepare students to place and enable them to function in complex environments. Currently, the world is facing various challenges related to sustainability, technology, and societal unity, directly impacting individual's everyday lives and work. Universities need to continually reassess the expectations of employers and students, and the evolving landscape of work and careers. Furthermore, universities need to meet the changing expectations of students who now consider employment outcomes and personal skill development within the context of successful academic outcomes, in addition to grade outcomes and degree completion (Coates et al., 2016; Walker-Gibbs, 2019; Dempsey, 2023). The employability research field details the evolving list of skills that are valued by employers: communication, teamwork, problem-solving, critical thinking, interpersonal presentation, customer care, business awareness and enterprise skills (Pope & Owen, 2014; Noonan & Goring, 2022; Mtawa et al., 2021). Wickramasinghe and Perera (2010) considered the top five employability skills from the perspective of both male and female graduates, employers, and university lecturers. Common to all were self-confidence (efficacy), problem solving and learning skills, all of which can be linked to help-seeking attitudes as enabling skills or valid steps in a process. A skill which the authors consider an important ingredient, which is often considered in a well-being context (Lua et al., 2022), rather than an employment context is help-seeking. Help-seeking is the act of sourcing support to achieve a positive result and considered an important

attribute for university graduates to possess to learn and solve problems as working professionals in today's complex organisations (van der Rijt et al., 2013).

The demand for skills is shaped by the wider social context. Delva et al. (2021) point out that employability includes several considerations including the context the graduate is seeking employment within and the potential that the graduate seeking employment might offer an organisation. According to Selvaratnam (2021), attributes and characteristics traditionally known as 'soft skills' (e.g., emotional intelligence, communication, and negotiation) will be more important in the context of future work skills and will form a core part of new industries shaped by the societal impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and the influence of artificial intelligence developments. For instance, according to Moustaghfir et al. (2023) critical thinking skills will have a new relevance because AI has a reputation for presenting errors, it is important that those working with AI question, validate, and critically scrutinise information. The nature of the required skills for new work contexts is still to be fully explored (Hoque et al., 2023). Granular understandings of what employers mean when they talk about skill gaps are required for higher education institutions to improve employability outcomes (Baird & Parayitam, 2019).

Underlying any consideration of employability is the notion of social capital, described by the sociologist Bourdieu (2011) as the collection of resources that an individual can draw on to improve their social and economic standing. For instance, social capital may mean familiarity with the employment networks within which an individual is attempting to work. Social capital impacts the assessments employers make when they review the applications university graduates submit when seeking work. Judgements of the potential value of a job applicant for an organisation, require employers to look for signals in the narrative presented by the applicant. The story is told through mediums such as resumes, interviews, and the manner in which applicants interact with a company before and during the application process. Employers tend to seek signals that align with past positive experiences (Anderson & Tomlinson, 2021). However, as Iyer (2021) points out, definitions of social capital are always changing, for instance, the COVID-19 pandemic changed the employability skills and networks which are now sought that are different to the capabilities previously valued.

Currently there is a 'culture of ambiguity' in workplace expectations, the agenda of organisations are in flux (Mahajan et al., 2022). Employment contexts are often pressurised. A range of pressures shape the concerns of employers as they attempt to predict the success conditions in which their organisations operate. National and global economic conditions are unstable; rising inflation and costs are impacting economies and prices. This is likely to create further uncertainty in labour markets as industries adapt and strive to stay competitive (Piroșcă et al., 2021). For university graduates, there is added complexity to be able to navigate and be capable of succeeding in a globalised world of work (Dauber & Spencer-Oatey, 2023).

Such an environment contributes to a tacit cultural script (Tomlinson, 2021). New employees need to navigate these situations, seeking assistance in a fashion deemed understandable to their colleagues. Applying appropriate help-seeking skills will be context dependent and rely on a set of skills we discuss in our result and discussions section. Research indicates that self-efficacy can play a 'mediating role' in employment and work contexts (see Cabrera-Aguilar, 2023 for an overview). Self-efficacy, a concept often attributed to the psychologist Bandura (Lightsey, 1999), refers to an individual's belief in their capability to organise themselves and execute the outcomes required in a particular situation (Bandura, 1982). The construct shapes an individual's confidence in their ability to secure and maintain employment, adapt to workplace demands, and achieve career success (Iyer, 2021). In addition to a strong internal belief in personal capability, the element of resilience underpins many of the employee traits that employers find most desirable and may be a core pillar of developing a help-seeking approach in an employment context. The concept of 'Psychological Capital' (Psycap) refers to the positive developmental stage of four key psychological traits in an individual; efficacy, optimism, hope and resilience (Luthans et al., 2007). University students themselves may connect strong Psycap development with their own perceived employability (Ayala & Manzano, 2021). Employees with high

levels of self-efficacy are more likely to be able to recompose themselves quickly from a stress situation and return to work more quickly. In the case of failure, individuals who identify as those with high self-efficacy, absorb insights more quickly and take negative feedback less personally (Orakci et al., 2023). Self-efficacy, a concept often aligned with problem solving in the literature, facilitates an individual's ability to successfully work through issues encountered.

As we explain in our Results and discussion section, the participants in our study explained that they seek out employees that not only hold self-efficacy, problem solving and communication skills but can seek help in a fashion accepted by their workplaces.

There are other global forces at work such as digital transformation. Those in the workforce without power can be a 'digigig' worker and provide services such as deliveries and menial tasks (Zhang et al., 2022). Rates and schedules are shaped by the algorithms and online recommendations underpinning digital systems (Zhang et al., 2022). Young people can be in tenuous situations that can lead to them being easily 'hired and fired' and made to compete in ways that were not required of previous generations (Hafeez et al., 2022). Students are well aware of the pressures on them and seek guidance about how to cope (Coetzee, 2023). Industry conditions change the expectations employers have of their staff, and as employers can access labour from a range of sources and function in resource-tight and competitive environments, there is a desire for employees who will loyally serve their organisation and go 'beyond the point of duty' continues to evolve (Gilbert, 2023).

The review of the literature informed the research aims and identified gaps in existing research to situate this research. A key objective of our research was to understand and validate the attributes of help-seeking that are most valued by employers so we may enhance the development of these skills for students so they can select and navigate careers they find beneficial during and post-study. In our Results and discussion section, we explain that during our exploration, we found that help-seeking underpinned our participants' understanding of their requirements. As Brown (2023) points out, university employability programs require constant review to maintain relevance. An additional aim of this research is to understand current conditions to inform our work and acquire an awareness of the value of the elements (e.g., fine-tuned teamwork skills, nuanced communication abilities) required by employers that are constantly shifting due to changing social circumstances (Hoque et al., 2023). A specific point that we focused on, which became apparent during our research process, was a need for employees with appropriate help-seeking skills.

Methodology

The research design, overall methodology and the ethical considerations used to investigate the research aims are detailed below.

Research design

We used an explorative qualitative approach based on Interpretivism, to progress an understanding of the perspectives of employers. Interpretivism holds that reality is socially constructed (see Chalmers, 2021 for an overview). On that basis, what is known is always negotiated within cultures, social settings, and relationships with other people (Ikram & Kenayathulla, 2022). We undertook interviews with employers across a range of industry settings to explore their understandings of employability skills.

Participants and recruitment

The university's employer database was used to progress the identification of potential participants. The database has been developed and maintained by the university's employability and careers department. The listings, approximately 300 in number, include every organisation that has been part of the university's graduate program and has employed Victoria University students.

Sourcing of participants was driven by interest shown to participate from the set of invitations sent to all individuals listed on VU’s Employer database. As an outcome this led to a range of individuals from different industries constituting the final sample. There were several Education recruiters included, as this reflects the course profile of our college. As the participant’s work was focused on the exercise of recruitment, we believe their insights are applicable to a range of industries, however we note this limitation in the practical limitations section of this article. Hiring and recruitment were major role activities of all our participants.

A final cohort of 16 participants volunteered and were interviewed. The following industries were represented: Engineering, I.T, Education and Training, Government, Recruitment, Health (Nursing), Insurance, Sport and Health. Similar to the research of Hoque et al. (2023), we sought views from a range of industries. Prior to the interview, participants were emailed further information detailing the specific requirements of their involvement in the research, a consent form, and the questions at the base of the semi-structured interview for their consideration prior to the interview. Please review Table 1 for detail about our participants, their gender and their industry. The majority of respondents to our request were Education industry employers, reflecting our role as an Education College producing a large number of teaching graduates each year.

Table 1. Overview of participants’ occupation and gender

No.	Interviewee’s industry	Interviewee’s gender	Interview length
01	Engineering	Male	29 mins
02	I.T	Male	23 mins 46 secs
03	Education and Training	Female	32 mins 14 secs
04	Government	Female	56 mins 18 secs
05	Education and Training	Female	17 mins 41 secs
06	Recruitment	Male	38 mins 50 secs
07	Health (Nursing)	Male	36 mins 38 secs
08	Education and Training	Male	48 mins 06 secs
09	Education and Training	Female	31 mins 31 secs
10	Education and Training	Male	38 mins 55 secs
11	Pharmaceuticals	Male	31 mins 45 secs
12	Insurance	Male	23 mins
13	Sport	Male	31 mins 30 secs
14	Health	Female	47 mins 58 secs
15	I.T	Male	27 mins 13 secs
16	Health	Female	27 mins 13 secs

Ethics

The ethics of our study design was deemed as ‘low risk’ by the University’s Ethics Committee (approval no. HRE23-127). The key research participants, employers, are in a position of power and were asked for insights into their perceptions of work skills, those required by graduate employees. On the basis of this power differential, we asked participants not to assess individual employee performance for us or refer to employees by name.

Interviews

Interview content was sourced to support the exploration of interviewees’ valuation of employment skills and their understanding current workplace conditions. Interviews constitute a procedure aligned with interpretivist practice. Interviewing allows in-depth insights into the ways interviewees construct their understandings of their worlds (Thanh & Thanh, 2015). Past studies have used semi-structured interviews with employers to source insights in employment interactions. García-Álvarez et al. (2022)

provide a systematic review of data-gathering tools used by researchers studying the intersection of employability and the preparation of higher education graduates. For instance, to gain insights into employers' views of contracting new employees, Rouvroye et al. (2022) asked their participants to consider their organisation's stance on engaging new employees, the advantages, and disadvantages of the method and then the individual's thoughts on the method. Tran et al. (2022) divides their question bank into three; employer expectations, employers' assessment techniques of graduate applications and university/industry co-design of employability education. These authors helped us identify gaps and also where detailed information was required. We built on their work to develop questions that ask employers what they mean when they refer to a particular skill and to provide an answer specific to the interviewee's context, and an Interview Guide was developed.

A series of semi-structured interviews were held with employers of the graduates of our university, using an interview Guide. In our interviews, participants were asked to reflect on the value of specific workplace skills required of graduates in the context of their organisation and their hiring processes. The examples of workplace skills were taken from research by the Australian Council of Young Australians (Pope & Owen, 2014; Noonan & Goring, 2022) who are regarded as leading Australian research into understanding the pressures of new graduates and the employment industry (Cebulla & Szpak, 2024).

The purpose of our questions was to glean understanding of the current organisational workforce recruitment environment. The interview guide questions were drafted, developed and tested by all members of the research team. Exemplar questions include:

- When considering the performance of a graduate employee, what is most important to you?
- How do you want graduate employees to solve problems?
- What sets of digital literacy skills should employees have?
- Tell us about someone who has excellent teamwork skills in your organisation. In a few bullet points, participants were also asked to explain their teamwork behaviour

We completed sixteen semi-structured interviews of approximately 10 questions, 30-40 minutes in length, using the video conferencing software Zoom. An audio file from each interview was developed and subsequently transcribed using a speech-to-text transcription service. The data files were imported into the NVivo software for analysis.

Data coding and analysis

Guided by our approach of Interpretivism, we used Inductive Thematic Analysis (Thomas, 2006) to explore our data because this style of analysis allows us to be steered by the insights provided by interviewees regarding the employability skills most important to them and what they expect from graduates. The interview material was stored as a data file and then coded and analysed using NVivo qualitative analysis software. We adopted a multi-levelled thematic analysis inductive approach in order to identify themes. Participants' responses were compared and analysed for recurring themes and concepts (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). Descriptors were developed to symbolise each identified theme. Codes were formulated for each skill nominated as by the Australian Council of Young Australians (Pope & Owen, 2014; Noonan & Goring, 2022). Categories included communication, networking, teamwork, and problem solving. Further refinement of the data involved members of the research team checking the categorisation of content to confirm the categories in the codebook. As an outcome of this task, additional themes were identified from within the participants' narrative. These themes include achievement of work goals in uncertain times and a need for junior staff who can utilise support from more senior staff, a concept we labelled as 'help-seeking'.

Results and discussion

This section will present the results and relevant evaluations of the interview data and subsequent contrasts with the relevant literature. Themes for discussion that emerged based on the coded data are the pertinence of help-seeking in resource-tight environments, the context-specific nature of help-seeking skills, the centrality of communication skills to help-seeking, the link between help-seeking and self-efficacy and the signals employers regard as indications of help-seeking skills.

Help-seeking as value-added problem-solving

Problem-solving, the ability for graduates to work through the process of solving cognitive and practical problems by applying intellectual and creative methods, is a well-documented employment skill (Holubnycha et al., 2024). In our data, we see a need for more nuanced problem-solving, demonstrating that an employee can seek the right level of assistance to resolve a challenge. One of our participants, Interviewee 1, highlights the importance of problem-solving skills when commenting on a graduate including mention of participation in a maths competition: ‘Okay, that tells me something. You have a brain that can solve a type of problem.’ However, in our data, as we explain in this section, often this skill alone is not regarded as enough by our participants. As we reflect in a later part of the results and discussion, perhaps this is because of the complex work environments graduates enter, shaped by the COVID-19 pandemic and uncertain economic futures that characterise recent years. Interviewee 5, a teacher recruiter, explains the complexity she sees for new employees:

As a graduate, you’re thrown into the deep end... You have to think for yourself, you have to plan for yourself. You have to find your own resources. We find that the most feedback that we get from schools is that an individual didn’t demonstrate any initiative.

Interviewee 11 wonders if problem-setting (Dorst 2019) is needed alongside problem-solving: ‘It’s often the ability to spot that problem and understand perhaps what needs to happen that can really assist people and the challenges that they might face.’

Our participants indicate that good problem-solving skills are not sufficient for new graduates. The set of skills in preferred graduates goes beyond traditional definitions of problems and as we outline in the results and discussion, skill categories overlap across each other. Understandings of skill sets are always changing (Hoque et al., 2023).

Help-seeking, resilience and self-efficacy

Help-seeking is also strongly linked to resilience and self-efficacy in the minds of some of our participants. Resilience is another concept that is well-documented in the employability field, as the ability to remain robust and maintain integrity, even in the face of significant, possibly unfavourable, and perhaps unexpected changes, with a loss of minimal energy (Rossier et al., 2017). Strong self-efficacy means that an individual is more likely to be confident to be resilient and have optimism regarding their employability (Räty et al., 2020). One of our interviewees, Interviewee 6 defines resilience as ‘having the tenacity to understand that you’re new, and it’s okay that you don’t know everything and to feel confident in forming relationships, and to ask questions when you don’t know and to be naturally curious.’

The quality of resilience, encountering and prevailing over adversity, is an ingredient of help-seeking behaviours (King et al., 2021). Resilience and self-efficacy skills support an individual’s help-seeking capability. As Interviewee 4 explains:

Resilience [...] is about how you get up. And I don’t think our students are equipped with any of those skills. They’re highly intelligent, highly capable, beautiful people. But these are not skills they were ever taught. And they’re the skills we need in our workforce.

Another interviewee, Interviewee 12, outlines how important help-seeking and resilience are for employers:

If you've got someone that's got quite a high level of resilience that can just work through those challenges, it just takes so much effort (away). I think everyone can identify an issue. But then there are the ones that [...] come up with a couple of solutions to work through with you. But you know, if you got someone that's quite a high level of resilience that can just work through those challenges, it just takes so much effort off the table in regards to how you lead that person.

Interviewee 1 adds:

you can't tell how resilient somebody is from an interview, you have to see in them and the pressure in the process that problem solving? Yes, that's important. I have given marks to candidates, even when they haven't responded fully to questions, as long as they could give me their train of thought on how to address a hypothetical problem.

As foreshadowed earlier, a strong sense of problem-solving in addition to self-efficacy was nominated by our employer interviewees as a precursor to help-seeking in their workplaces. Interviewee 4 explains the link between self-efficacy, resilience and effective help-seeking skills:

They [graduate employees] also need to be confident, in that they trust themselves. They've spent time getting a qualification. But that doesn't mean they don't ask questions, that doesn't mean they're not going to fail, they've got to have more than resilience. It's about them having a personal belief that 'I can go and ask that question. I can challenge the manager, I can escalate or whatever'. And then the manager has confidence that junior employees will escalate issues.

The interview data reinforces how help-seeking, resilience and self-efficacy skills are interlinked. As Holubnycha et al. (2024) point out, the value given to one particular interconnected skill depends on the subjective reading by the employer.

Help-seeking and communication skills

Communication skills were also highlighted by the participants as underpinning help-seeking skills. Mtawa et al. (2021) agree, communication skills are usually the most sought after by employers. The type of communication skills employers look at are clarity (using appropriate terminology), and communications that are complete, concise, and correct (command of grammar and spelling). Without communication skills, employees can be misunderstood. Trust deficits can be a result of this constrained communication and these can sometimes take up a significant amount of a manager's time and stand in the way of an organisation reaching its aims (Krishnan et al., 2019). When a graduate employee is directly engaging with the clients or stakeholders of an organisation, communication skills gain even more importance in the minds of potential employers (Hayes et al., 2022). Interviewee 9's comments reflect the centrality of communication skills:

Both internally, externally, you want someone that is communicating well, with everyone and clearly and not creating misunderstandings, and not sort of communicating in a way that's detrimental to the relationships that you've built up with internal and external people. So being good across all forms of communication is pretty key.

Although some would argue that it is risky for new employees to be open about their limitations (Krishnan et al., 2019), one of our participants, Interviewee 5, said she would prefer to hear from new employees through open communication and dialogue:

Over the last few years, everything has been a little bit harder. Graduate employees are scared to tell us about their weaknesses. If they struggle [...] we would rather that they tell us, and we'll be able to coach them, give you some resources and some PD to try and help boost their confidence in that area.

Another employer, Interviewee 4, added that she expects new graduate employees to have open mindsets and be able to articulate both what they know and don't know.

It's the manager's job to find the gaps and support them with the right learning or the right mentoring, the right coaching, but it is the staff member's responsibility or the graduate's responsibility to say, 'Hey, I'm not feeling comfortable here. Can you help me? Either I need more training or I need to understand how this works or, or whatever.'

In context, communication skills are not just the ability to express a point and understand others. There is a requirement to respond to specific and sometimes high-demand situations. For instance, sometimes a junior employee may need to explain to a senior employee that they are missing some of the information pertinent to a situation. Successfully undertaking this knowledge exchange is an art, Interviewee 4 adds:

When they have some knowledge that the manager doesn't yet have ... How do they impart that with the right level of professionalism and skill that ensures that the manager actually listens? It's got to be concise. It's got to be direct. It's going to be all those things, but not with arrogance.

The scope of communication skills includes the ability to be able to comprehend and apply organisational documentation (Kettunen & Tynjälä, 2022). Interviewee 7 explains how she trained a new employee, using organisational guiding documentation, to help them solve a problem and also indicates what employers can provide to assist employees to perform:

We cared for a war veteran in his 90s in palliative care, he was not given very long to live, he did pass away at home. It happened when one of my new nurses was on shift. It was great to be able to pull out a policy and a procedure and say, 'Hey, go have a read of it. I'll work through with you over the phone' and we did. So just having those supports in place is key.

Help-seeking skills are supported by communication skills that enable graduates to negotiate workplaces characterised by uncertainty (Santilli et al., 2022). Communication skills convey an individual's ability to deliver the help-seeking skills that are sought after.

'Help-seeking' skills are industry and context-specific

Employers seek a specific help-seeking mindset, not just a resourceful approach to solving problems. Lua et al. (2022) found that help-seeking is regarded very differently in different countries and, in our research, expectations differed across organisation cultures. Our interviewees told us about the specific conditions of their workplaces and their roles within that context. They recruit graduate employees to assist them achieve the specific aims of that organisation. For instance, one participant said:

In the public service, we are now very ill-resourced. And that's because we just don't have the money at the moment. We're strategically looking at what we need to do, what we can do and what we can't do. We need to do well. So for me, a graduate coming in, I don't want them to scatter gun, I want them to come in and ask questions about what needs to happen. (Interviewee 4)

As Delva et al. (2021) emphasise, employability is not merely about the quantity of activities undertaken, but rather the alignment of these activities with the 'doxa' or conventions of a specific field. The alignment with field-specific expectations and standards ensures that individuals not only develop relevant skills but also signal their understanding of and commitment to the professional norms and values. Interviewee 2 explains:

It is just teaching the correct mindset. If they haven't worked on non-trivial projects before, new engineers tend to give up after the second thing they try. And so, as part of our onboarding document, we say, if you're planning on asking someone for help, before you approach them, do your research first. Understand the problem, and clearly explain the context around it. You should not only understand the problem you're facing, you should also try your best to come up with a solution. How the research that you've done, the 'pros and cons'.

Interviewee 7 adds:

So, I want employees that are basically autonomous self-starters who can do things on their own. But if they need a hand off, they've got a blocker or there's a problem. I want them to be able to recognise that they can pick up the phone and give me a call. So I want that flat structure, I want to open communication, no barriers.

Interview data revealed employer perspectives reflective of a resource-constrained education environment, identifying critical thinking as an underpinning to help-seeking. Help should be sought if a new employee does not understand the overall aims to be achieved, otherwise, employees should improvise and attempt to resolve problems independently:

As a new teacher, you're thrown into the deep end. It is completely different to what it's like when you're on placement. You have to think for yourself, you have to plan for yourself. You have to find your own resources. (Interviewee 3)

This interviewee also provides an example of the type of help-seeking required by education graduates. The context she explains demonstrates the need for new employers to respond flexibly and resourcefully to the environments they are in, so as to deliver the agenda of the client. Further to this, Interviewee 5 explained that an employer of a junior teacher in a school might say:

They didn't show any initiative today and did whatever they wanted to do, because they didn't understand the planner. If you don't understand the planner, go and ask for help. If it says use a dice, and there's no dice, what can you use instead of the dice? Critical thinking comes into that. If something's not as it seems, what can you do instead?

Different industries expect certain types of help-seeking mindsets. In this example, one of the interviewees explains the mindset expected of nurses. We can see help-seeking requirements change when the focus is on delivering care to one person rather than an education context:

From a nurse's point of view, it means that they don't think about themselves so much, but the client or patient that they're working with. How do the client's parents feel? Put themselves into that context, when making decisions and the way that you're treating them. Have they been well informed? Are they the right health decisions? Critical thinking is not just about thinking about yourself and what you're doing. (Interviewee 7)

A continuing general educational focus for universities is to ensure that students are aware of the help-seeking mindset required in their employment context.

Our interviewees' comments indicate that the skill of help-seeking is nuanced. There is a balance employees need to achieve, for instance, between assertiveness and passivity or confidence and circumspection (Anderson & Tomlinson, 2021). Universities can help students understand the nuance.

Help-seeking more pertinent in resource-tight environments

Our data indicates that the need for help-seeking capabilities is heightened by contexts where resources are tight, for instance in economies under stress (Diab-Bahman & Al-Enzi, 2020). The pandemic, by causing extreme disruption and stress, has changed the shape of workplaces permanently (Minbaeva & Navrberg, 2023). Interviewee 2 mentions work arrangements and adjusting to new processes can create tension, 'It is difficult right now, especially when people aren't face to face, we have some people working remotely.' Interviewee 5 describes the problem from the graduate employee's perspective:

As a graduate, you're thrown into the deep end. It is completely different to what it's like when you're on placement. You have to think for yourself, you have to plan for yourself. You have to find your own resources.

One of the interviewees explains the value of help-seeking in this situation in the quote below. We can see that help-seeking involves asking questions to 'action' the management aims as quickly as possible. Analytical skills support help-seeking skills:

In the public service, we are now very ill-resourced. We're strategically looking at what we need to do, what we can do and what we can't do. So for me, a graduate coming in, I don't want them to scatter gun, I want them to come in and ask questions about what needs to happen. (Interviewee 4)

This participant then further explains the specific skills expected of new graduates she intends to utilise:

Those analytical skills to know what to investigate. We want somebody who asks questions, verifies what they need to do, and then gets on with it or knows whether they need assistance or whether they need to come back for validation. Or knows when they need to escalate an issue. (Interviewee 4)

The insights from our participants indicate a priority to engage new, junior employees who can assist them to deliver in difficult environments, achieve the priorities of an organisation, and with the level of assistance an organisation deems appropriate. Interviewee 16 wonders if it is because graduates are not being prepared for difficult environments:

A lot of them feel overwhelmed and unsupported. And that says to me they're not prepared. But they're very critical of things that they see. And they get very disillusioned very quickly because aged care is not rosy.

Our participants exemplify reports from the literature (Diab-Bahman & Al-Enzi, 2020; Minbaeva & Navrberg, 2023) outlining the impact of pressure on the working lives of graduates. The lack of resourcing means that employers are not able to take risks (Minbaeva & Navrberg, 2023) regarding the investments they make, including new employees.

Signals of help-seeking skills

Research explores the intent of employers to look for signs of well-developed help-seeking skills before they hire a graduate employee (Anderson & Tomlinson, 2021). Signs are forms of evidence, available not just in the formal qualifications a job applicant holds but in the wider narrative presented in their job application. In a job application process, employers assess whether an applicant

demonstrates what Tomlinson (2021) calls the tacit cultural script. This interviewee explains what she looks for:

They demonstrate indicators that they are going to be a good teacher [...] how quickly they present their documents to us, how organised they are, their communication skills, that kind of tells you a lot about how they're going to perform. You will have some people that you can outline the to-do list and give them a verbal understanding of what that is. And they will respond very quickly. (Interviewee 3)

Tandika and Ndijuye (2021) acknowledge that employers can use a job seeker's approach to a job application as an indicator of a potential employee's ability to handle the pressure and demands of a role. As employers often engage employees without deep prior knowledge of their abilities, employers rely on signals or indications of valued skills from any material a potential employee provides regarding their ability to seek help (Anderson & Tomlinson, 2021). The signs of potential will be based on the employer's past experience.

Practical implications

Our data provides evidence that employee help-seeking skills are sought by employers. An important focus is in relation to how higher education institutions are preparing students so that they are enabled to successfully engage in the requirements of the work within their future careers, including environments being impacted by artificial intelligence (AI). Favourable outcomes will require flexibility and creativity by higher education institutions, students and employers (Mahajan et al., 2022). It is not sufficient for students to only implement sophisticated and well-tuned help-seeking capabilities they need to communicate their processes and outcomes to others such as management. This outcome has previously been identified as a common problem for graduate employees (Goodwin et al., 2019). Certain students are unable to recognise, or articulate their skills without a prompt, limiting the type of jobs to which they can apply. In our research, we found that some employers wish to know about their new employees' developmental areas weaknesses. Conveying such information to employers can be fraught and help-seeking education needs to explore how to safely convey information about skill levels and comfort.

A limitation in our study needs to be noted. Of the 16 participants included in this study, five were from the education industry. There is a potential imbalance in the perspectives represented. The overrepresentation means that the findings may be more reflective of the priorities, experiences, and challenges faced within the education sector than of those from other industries. Arguably, education recruiters work in contexts that are orientated towards public service rather than commercial agendas.

Creating learning experiences to boost help-seeking skills

We recommend higher education institutions provide learning experiences that illuminate help-seeking. Students need to understand the nuanced actions associated with seeking assistance and that employer expectations may change. Boosting students' self-efficacy and resilience should be at the core of a help-seeking education program. Facilitating students to plan a life-long learning path can help support their self-confidence to negotiate emerging working environments.

AI is widely regarded as a tool that can undertake a range of workplace activities such as automate tasks, create content, and generally improve productivity (Cebulla & Szpak, 2024). Recent and rapid developments in the field of AI have meant that AI is cheaper and more accessible so it is no longer the sole domain of I.T practitioners and will impact the help-seeking expectations employers' hold. We need to apply our findings to AI influenced workplaces to keep the relevance of our practical implications.

The environments our graduates will enter may be characterised by anxiety on the part of their employers. Currently AI is seen as an innovative force that if not adopted correctly and with speed, organisers will be left behind and out of the market (Cebulla & Szpak, 2024). Employers will expect new graduates to already hold the knowledge of how to seek help from and solve problems with AI systems. For instance, AI is known to help users with the ‘cold-start’ problem, when someone does not know how to start a task. AI can proofread written communications, employers may expect material created by their new employees to be error-free, yet at university, students may feel that if they submit work assisted by AI they will be accused of plagiarism (Jarrah et al., 2023). Additionally, employers may prefer new graduates to come with them with knowledge of AI applications to assist the organisation, in the face of a lack of training being available in a workplace. As one of our participants informed us, educating senior employees in an organisation is a delicate balance, requiring careful context understanding. Employers may have exaggerated expectations of the AI skills held by younger people, often one generation makes misinformed assumptions about the skills and experiences of those younger than them (Pegrum, 2011). However, early indications highlight that AI has caused inequalities between younger and older workers to increase (Haslberger et al., 2023). It is incumbent on universities to provide students with a set of useful AI help-seeking skills and knowledge, and insights about lifelong learning.

Our research tells us that help-seeking learning experiences should still also include the following elements: (a) Coaching to help students to identify an organisation and an organisational unit’s aims; (b) Tutoring to locate, read, interpret, and apply company policies and procedures; and (c) Reviewing case studies to demonstrate workplace help-seeking strategies in action.

Industry-specific advice

Following the advice of Winterton and Turner (2019), university work programs need to be industry-specific, dependent on the course and discipline students are studying, and help-seeking education should be tailored for different industries. Our interviewee from an I.T background nominated a different help-seeking mentality to the skills required for Nursing, as described by another interviewee. Even within an industry, our interviewees indicated that appropriate help-seeking is highly contextual. Graduates need to know how to read and research the contexts in which they are aiming to be employed.

Future directions

A future step for our research is to understand how the concept of help-seeking connects with other skills, such as communication and AI literacies. We intend to map help-seeking against skills such as teamwork, problem-solving and digital literacy. The map will integrate the question of ‘What clusters of skills do employers seek?’ and ‘What signals do they look for in an application?’. By receiving feedback from university alumni, we can gauge the success of our help-seeking education endeavours and comprehend the metrics we can use to measure our progress. We also wish to widen our understanding of help-seeking ‘as a social process’ (Hoque et al. 2023), and its connection to concepts such as status and trust in workplaces. Communication with students is key, students need to understand the wider employment context, as there can be a mismatch between employer and student expectations (Lock & Kelly, 2022). With these insights, we can develop more nuanced programs to improve students’ help-seeking capabilities.

Conclusion

Our endeavour was to understand employers’ tacit cultural scripts (Tomlinson, 2021), that shape the expectations and requirements for new employees. Our data, a set of interviews with employers across a range of contexts, revealed that the importance of help-seeking skills is emphasised by the

global experience of the pandemic and that the help-seeking skills sought by employers are nuanced and contextual. They seek capabilities to underpin help-seeking including communication skills and self-efficacy. It is incumbent on universities to enable students and alumni to negotiate complex work environments. Our recommendation is for universities to offer access to a breadth and diversity in help-seeking employability curriculum, which explores both the constituent characteristics of a help-seeking mindset and the critical elements graduates can best signal help-seeking capabilities in a job application. Requisite help-seeking skills are industry-specific, so advice for students needs to be tailored. As AI now dominates workplace discussions, we unpack the new expectations of help-seeking skill requirements currently emerging. We believe that students will need to be critical thinking help-seekers. If they can independently research a solution and train those senior to them in AI literacies, they will be very well-placed.

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