



Women and Lifelong Employability

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The economic consequences of the global pandemic have greatly impacted employability in the United States, especially for those with limited means and protections such as health insurance and sick leave. The pandemic has exposed existing vulnerabilities and inequalities in our economic system. Women have been particularly impacted by job and income loss. Many women who worked through the pandemic found themselves on the front line providing essential services while taking on the risk of exposure to COVID-19. Furthermore, the pandemic has highlighted the problem of unpaid care and domestic work where women have experienced a disproportionate burden compared to their male counterparts (Impact, 2020). As we move out of the global pandemic and into recovery, labor composition, workplace values, and employment rules of engagement are once again changing. Events such as the transformation of capitalism, globalization, and the pandemic have put an end to full employment as we know it and subsequently has led to new career models (Insa et al., 2016). Technology has moved society beyond a single workspace and into environments where flexibility, agility, and lifelong learning are needed to maintain longevity in the workforce. To keep pace and succeed in the labor market, lifelong employability should be viewed as an investment that is managed with mindfulness and purpose (Murray, 2015). Additionally, employability is greatly influenced by career attitudes and skills (Santos et al., 2019). For example, Dalton et al. (2018) posit women value skills that foster connections across people, contexts and knowledge while male's value skills that foster being heard and standing out. Understanding both perspectives will allow women to better strategize employment opportunities and move beyond psychological and social barriers to employment. While there are many constructs of employability, for the purpose of this paper employability constructs will be limited to reinvention, resilience, reframing, and resolve.

Reinvention is the ability to acquire both hard and soft skills needed for employment (Murray, 2015). Hard skills are technical and measurable; they are built through education and job training. Soft skills are more personality based and are learned through engagement with others and reflection. Identity also plays an important role in reinvention where our identity can be viewed as a struggle where we come to terms with our past, present, and future. Through reflection, our identity informs us of how we are shaped by the past but it also gives us a vantage point to shape the present and future (Ruškus et al., 2004; Weiner, 1999). Job crafting is one way to reinvent work. Job crafting is the

process of physically or cognitively modifying responsibilities and relationships at work to align with personal values and strengths. It is a method that allows an individual to foster a more positive identity and to satisfy psychological needs that promote well-being. For example, an outcome of job crafting is flow at work - an intense moment of short duration where immersion in the moment, enjoyment, and intrinsic motivation collide, time is distorted, and in the moment, there is a loss of self (Devotto et al., 2020). Eudaimonic well-being, where individuals experience moments of worthwhileness and flow, leads to more positive emotions, feelings of pleasure, a more positive outlook on work and enhanced performance (Soriano et al., 2020). Like job crafting, lifelong learning is key to employability (Jackson, 2003; Murray, 2015) but this approach necessitates planning and strategy. Many working women are trapped in a cycle of lifelong earning making just enough to get by but never enough to escape market forces constructed in inequalities that support patriarchal capitalism (Jackson, 2003). Reinvention means taking another look at the division of labor in the home and at work. Proactively figuring out what works and does not work. Drawing boundaries, setting aside time for learning opportunities, and most importantly recognizing you are worth it. The payoff is greater professional competitiveness and more successful employability (Ruškus et al., 2004).

Resilience in the context of this paper refers to the ability to learn, adapt and overcome a lifetime of obstacles while aging in the workplace. As a leadership skill, resilience is becoming increasingly important. As an individual skill, building resilience takes time and deliberate practice (Trujillo-Villa, 2021). Women in general experience gender barriers and economic disadvantages throughout their lifetime of employment however as women age, they also experience health, social, and cultural disadvantages. Resilience is a useful tool when used to confront the reality of obstacles and to redefine success in terms of individual capacity. Women can practice resilience while aging by learning to change the meaning of stressful events and by reducing immediate negative reactions (Huyck, 2017). However, women often carry a burden of shame in the workplace. As a psycho-social-cultural construct, shame is focused on the emotions, thoughts, and behaviors of women (Brown, 2006). The social element of shame relates to an interpersonal framework that ties directly to relationship and connections (Brown, 2006; Dalton et al., 2018). The cultural component focuses on cultural expectations and the shame involved with not meeting those expectations. Without mindful and purposeful reinvention women can feel trapped, powerless, and isolated. Building shame resilience takes practice. It starts with the ability to recognize and accept personal vulnerability. As women we must learn to give ourselves grace. Women must also think critically about the social and cultural expectations placed on women and how media and other shaming mechanisms drive standards. Relationship building among women will allow for supportive networks and empathic relationships. Learning to talk about shame, conceptualizing it and deconstructing it will allow women to put shame into perspective and then move beyond it (Brown, 2016). As women mindfully and purposefully practice resilience, their ability to do so grows more robust and present (Tabassum et al., 2018).

Reframing definitions vary among sources. For this paper, reframing refers to cognitive reframing as a concept of analysis. It's about leaving little room for negative emotions in order to think critically about distress management or needed change. Cognitive reframing is about changing the conceptual viewpoint of an event in relation to how the event is received and processed. A change in behavior is the goal of cognitive reframing and the outcome is improved well-being. But to make it work, women must exercise a sense of personal control. The goal of cognitive reframing is to alter perceptions of distorted or self-defeating beliefs and to convert those beliefs into something positive

and supportive (Robson & Troutman-Jordan, 2014). A common stereotype is that women are more likely to display emotion than men. Research shows both men and women express emotion in the workplace however, those emotions are interpreted as originating from different traits and in the context of broader gender stereotypes. Male emotion is a sign of agency, motivation, and strength while female emotion is a sign of communality, gentility, and expressiveness (MacGill, 2018; Mohn, 2020; Wolf et al., 2016). Understanding the difference provides women with an understanding of differences in emotional regulation and in the context of work, the ability to discern when change is needed. Reframing is important for establishing boundaries and as a decision tool when recognizing you no longer have the capacity to keep yourself in a negative work environment or under the supervision of a leader who does not value your identity or self-worth.

Resolve refers to self-determination as a principle of practice at a personal level and professional level. From a personal perspective, many women have been and are now in a relationship where they do the nurturing, supporting and empowering but are not given the same in return. Many women find themselves in this situation because we live in a society that encourages women to opt for connection without consideration of consequences. The consequences include, but are not limited to, a loss of self-esteem and an underdevelopment of a full range of personal and professional capacities. As women we must recognize that we live in a society that distorts or takes advantage of women's strengths (Rubenstein & Lawler, 1990). As we build our identity during the course of our working life, women must be vigilant to reinvent themselves when necessary. Resilience and reframing will allow women to establish boundaries and to determine what is acceptable as it relates to presence in the workplace, identity, and well-being. From a professional perspective, self-determination is the ability to choose one's behavior and to make decisions and respond appropriately to our circumstances. In the context of self-determination, resolve is the ability to think about Self, to be aware of our presence, to know the kind of person we desire to be, to have a sense of our self-worth, and to protect these "knowing" abilities at all cost (Deci & Ryan, 2007; Sprague & Hayes, 2000).

The importance of thinking critically about reinvention, resilience, reframing, and resolve as they relate to employability cannot be overstated. Empowerment for women in the workplace is about having control over life decisions, having a strategic road map with goals and objectives that lay a path for work. Empowerment is about perceived agency, job satisfaction, well-being, and bargaining power when needed (Abrar ul Haq et al., 2019). The long-term lock down in response to COVID-19 provided a unique opportunity to reevaluate the changing nature of work, the importance of empowerment, and well-being (Jenkins et al., 2021) as it relates to employability. Events such as the transformation of capitalism, globalization, and the pandemic have put an end to full employment as we know it and subsequently has led to new career models (Insa et al., 2016). As women continue to navigate the changing landscape of employability, self-reflection will play an important role in the perceptions of work, self-worth, and well-being.

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