





## Employability and Industrial Mutations



**Technological Changes and Human Resources Set**

coordinated by  
Patrick Gilbert

Volume 4

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**Employability and  
Industrial Mutations**

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*Between Individual Trajectories and  
Organizational Strategic Planning*

*Edited by*

Florent Noël  
Géraldine Schmidt

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## Foreword by Patrick Gilbert

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While technological change is, at least potentially, a source of progress, it also brings its share of uncertainties and fragilities. This is true of their effects on employment. Industrial change has always had consequences in this area. At the level of nations, organizations and individuals, the difficulty is always to assess the scope of these changes and to prepare for them.

Industrial revolutions have followed one another with well-known consequences on the content of work and the volume of jobs. Today, the “digital revolution”, while giving rise to the hope of new jobs, also poses certain threats with the rise of automation and the emergence of artificial intelligence. A recent OECD report (2019) on employment prospects estimates that, in the next 20 years, 16.4% of French jobs will be threatened and 32.8% will undergo a radical transformation.

In a period marked by these major transformations, companies are therefore led to reflect, very early on, on the actions to be taken on human resources. Hence, the notion of employability is becoming central and cannot simply be left to the initiative of each worker and the State. Beyond the institutional injunction to be responsible for one’s own destiny, what does this notion of employability cover? What is its history? What issues does it address? What are the respective roles of public policies, managerial practices and individual actions? What can be said (and done) about unemployment? How can we meet the challenge of the digitalization of jobs? What are the levers for building employability?

This book, which brings together researchers from different specialties around these issues, aims to shed light on the current changes in work by addressing the theme of employability in all its complexity. I am proud to welcome it to this series.

Patrick GILBERT  
Professor at IAE Paris-Sorbonne  
Head of the series  
“Technological Changes and Human Resources”  
November 2021

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## Foreword by IPSI

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1980s... 1990s... At the trade union level, the word employability was not acceptable. It was seen as a tool for the exclusive use of employers to organize terminations and support outplacement.

Today, the ability to be employed has become one of the major challenges for companies, so that employees can adapt to the internal and external changes taking place. The exponential digitalization of all work relations is one of the concrete illustrations of these changes.

The ability of human beings to adapt to changes in their work is, more than ever, a key element in the success of these transformations. However, sociological constraints remain and the initial suspicion is sometimes still present. Although significant efforts have been made in training to “nurture” and develop skills, this is not enough.

The initial mistrust will only disappear completely if firms help to set up work organizations that promote and develop the ability to be employed. This requires employers accepting, internally, a different distribution of powers, in order to free the initiative and the responsibility of the employees.

It is at the price of this “revolution” that the ability to be employed will gain the support of all the actors in the company. If the work organization parameter becomes a central element of the management method, adaptation to change could be more natural, because it is permanent.

Today, it is not enough to have good ideas. They must be shared. The conditions for employability must therefore be worked out in concert with the employees themselves and their representatives, through a permanent, high-quality social dialogue, which requires a number of prerequisites (trust, carrying out a shared inventory before any negotiations, etc.).

This joint work on employability in periods of major change will make the adaptation actions of companies more legitimate and acceptable, including in the event of restructuring: “I will be more confident about my future if I know that I have the ability to adapt to a new job”.

The *Institution pour le progrès social dans l'industrie* (IPSI) is a joint association whose founding members are the *Groupement des entreprises sidérurgiques et métallurgiques* (GESiM), on the one hand, and the trade unions CFTC, CFDT, CGT-FO and CFE-CGC, on the other hand.

The association's main objectives are as follows:

– to contribute to the improvement of social, professional and strategic dialogues in companies;

– to promote a management by competencies, a management that is responsible, valorizing and a source of performance in the long-term;

– to contribute to all innovations and experiments in social matters;

– in a more global way, to take an interest in all subjects in the field of human resources (work organization, skills management, training, etc.).

Its operation is based on the exchange of experiences and joint sharing between HRDs, DAS and federal representatives of trade unions.

IPSI, in the wake of Think Tanks, also has a more operational vocation as a Do Tank: support, observation and capitalization of social experiments.

**Box 1. *IPSI (Institution pour le progrès social dans l'industrie) in a nutshell***

The company, as a cell of society, would thus have a better capacity to adapt to the evolution of its environment thanks to employees who, in the course of their duties, have permanently developed their own capacity to be employed in a context of constant change.

Xavier LE COQ  
President of IPSI  
President of the CFE-CGC Sidérurgie French National Iron and Steel Union

Jacques LAUVERGNE  
Vice-President of IPSI, President of GESiM

Emmanuelle CHAPELIER  
General Delegate of IPSI

November 2021



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## Introduction

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The Mutations – Anticipations – Innovations research chair at IAE Paris Sorbonne Business School has been structured for some 20 years in the form of a collective of researchers and economic actors (employers, trade unionists, consultants and experts) concerned with producing knowledge useful for action on the economic, technological, organizational and sociological changes that have an impact on employment and skills. Like this book, this network is open to a variety of disciplinary and institutional positions.

Since 2019, a partnership with the *Institution paritaire pour le progrès social dans l'industrie* (IPSI), a forum for dialogue and experimentation involving industrial employers and four representative trade unions (CFDT, CFE-CGC, CFTC and FO), has made it possible to extend the Chair's discussions. It encourages the sharing of experiences and points of view, and the capitalization of knowledge necessary for collective learning within a joint observatory of industrial mutations. This book, the result of a research seminar organized in December 2019, is one of the milestones. Its ambition is to produce actionable knowledge by mobilizing research work firmly anchored in concrete situations to shed light on managerial decision-making on a practical issue: employability.

Choosing the theme of employability is far from trivial. As our partners suggest in the joint foreword they have written together, referring to employability in France is a political choice. When the word was dropped into the public debate in the mid-1990s by Jacques Barrot, then French Minister of Labor, it announced a change of perspective: the fight against the mass unemployment that was plaguing French society did not necessarily involve preventing redundancies, but could also involve better equipping workers for their professional transition. This is a paradigm shift for HRM thinking: adjusting employment is no longer a shameful decision as soon

as employees find internal or external re-employment. Betting on employability means betting on movement and adaptability and giving up on stability and immobility; it means thinking of the “work factor” as a flow and no longer as a resource.

Since then, a succession of reforms has been introduced to support this project: greater flexibility in the terms and conditions for terminating employment contracts (with redundancy gradually giving way to contractual termination), the development of access to training independently of the employer, the portability of social rights, and the development of a rhetoric that makes individuals responsible for their own career paths. If yesterday’s “talent” made it possible to find a “good situation”, today’s “talent” consists of knowing how to be wary of putting down roots and moving from situation to situation by seizing opportunities.

This change of perspective is part of fundamental societal changes – the “liquid society”. It also reflects and makes possible a change in changes. These changes are probably more rapid, and quantitative and qualitative adjustments to the workforce can no longer be matched at the rate of generational renewal. The feeling has taken hold that there is an urgent need to adapt always and everywhere to new technologies, to intensifying competition, and to an environment that has become so turbulent that any effort at planning has become futile. Employability is seen as an imperative: an imperative for job seekers, obviously; an imperative for employees for whom being employable allows them to remain in employment despite the changes; an imperative for companies, which can see it as a way of succeeding in their transformations, all the more so because mobility is less costly for employees.

However, this rosy picture needs to be qualified. Although, at first glance, employability is defined as the ability to find a job or remain in a job, it is only a solution if workers have the concrete possibility of seizing quality opportunities and of not embarking on career paths marked by precariousness, downgrading and loss of income. However, the changes we are talking about here often have the effect of destroying the value of acquired skills and putting workers in competition with each other each time they appear on the internal or external labor markets. Flexibility without insecurity is the challenge.

This collective work returns to these questions. First, the concept of employability and its implications for public authorities, organizations and employees will be better defined (Part 1). It will then be possible to specify several figures of the employable or unemployable worker to better understand what being employable means (Part 2). Then, examples of management systems will be presented, all of which contribute to the development of employability at different stages of a career: recruitment, skills upgrading and reclassification (Part 3). Finally,

the question of developing or maintaining employability will be examined as the result of the work situations and contexts in which workers evolve (Part 4).

The first part of this book aims to clarify the issues involved in thinking about employability by crossing disciplinary perspectives. In Chapter 1, Bernard Gazier first traces the history of the concept by adopting the point of view of the public authorities, for whom the challenge is to deal with the nagging issue of mass unemployment and to fight against the casualization and downgrading of workers. This leads him to look back at the various employment policies that have followed one another and that have become sedimented. Between measures to evict people from the labor market, the fight against discrimination, access to training and career guidance services, different conceptions of employability are emerging, ranging from the objectives of combating poverty to the “construction” of a worker responsible for his or her career and able to interact with the opportunities offered by the labor market and institutions. Géraldine Schmidt and Florent Noël (Chapter 2) approach the issue of employability from a business perspective: developing employability is one of the conditions for the success of the restructuring, mutations and transformations that companies must carry out to remain competitive. Making employees employable ultimately means facilitating professional transitions and making changes more easily acceptable. This means planning workforce movements and skills development efforts, and also empowering employees. It can also mean letting employees decide on the direction of their activity and thus build, in an emergent and bottom-up way, the organization and even the strategy of the company. This brings us to the emancipatory conception of employability put forward by Bénédicte Zimmermann in Chapter 3, who, on the basis of fieldwork, explores the conditions under which employability is confused with the ability of individuals to widen their field of possibilities to enable them to make professional choices of value to them, thus distancing themselves from the constraints of the labor market, on the one hand, and organizational rigidities, on the other hand. These three contributions set out the terms of the debate: the challenge of employability is not only to gain access to employment or to remain in employment, but also to aim for dignified living conditions and ultimately to aspire to freedom.

This broadening of perspectives allows us in the second part to draw a portrait of employable or, in a sense, unemployable workers. It is a question of discussing “what staying on the sidelines” or “being in the running” could be. To this end, Chapter 4, written by Raymonde Ferrandi on the basis of her experience as a psychologist working in social services to help with social and professional integration, draws up a series of portraits of people excluded from employment. These are people who are not allowed to work for administrative or medical reasons, or people who belong to discriminated groups. They are sometimes people who do not manage to master the social codes in force in the world of work or who, for various reasons, keep themselves away from work, which they see as an

insurmountable situation. It is the weight of social representations of people or individual representations of work that is highlighted. In contrast to these problems of exclusion, Pauline de Becdelièvre, Cindy Felio and Jean-Yves Ottmann focus in Chapter 5 on qualified Information Technology workers who embark on the adventure of self-employment. The life stories they present are those of workers wishing to emancipate themselves from subordination – sometimes driven by a desire for independence, sometimes as a result of accidents along the way – who then have to work on themselves and for themselves to make themselves attractive. Constant monitoring of new technologies and professional practices, “self-marketing” and the maintenance of networks become the conditions, not always met, for their professional development. Martina Gianecchini, Paolo Gubitta and Sara Dotto finally address the problem of employability for “stable” employees (Chapter 6). Their questionnaire survey of a large sample of Italian workers shows the importance of the ability to interact broadly with the various trades that make up a company. Particularly for jobs related to innovation or team management, mastering a particular expertise is not enough. The “digital revolution”, in particular, requires an interest in other specialties. This observation leads the authors to plead for the return of the “honest man of the Renaissance”, gifted with a broad and general understanding of problems and capable of imposing himself in project mode.

At the end of these first two parts, the reader will hopefully have a better understanding of what is meant by employability development. The third part describes concrete management systems set up by companies, sometimes in collaboration with labor market actors, to develop employability. These examples show that employability is not an attribute of individuals, but that it is the result of approaches to identifying and enhancing skills that explain the concrete dynamics of careers. Being employable is a question of collective judgment which requires coordination between the actors involved: individuals and employers *at least*. In Chapter 7, Anne-Laure Gatignon-Turnau and Séverine Ventolini discuss the simulation-based recruitment method developed by Pôle emploi, which makes it possible to dispense with the *curriculum vitae* that penalize the long-term unemployed and those who are furthest from employment. Putting workers in a situation makes it possible to validate the possession of skills despite the absence of validated training or validated experiences. It can be a way for companies to broaden their sourcing to compensate for possible labor shortages. This way of organizing the meeting of labor supply and demand ultimately makes it possible to establish a dialogue between employers and new employees and has the effect of strengthening commitment to work. Chapter 8 is in the same vein, but for different categories. Thierry Colin, Benoît Grasser and Fabien Meier present the skills enhancement approach developed in an aeronautics company to recruit for production positions with high requirements of reliability and quality. What’s more, these positions involve new products and technologies that do not yet exist. *A fortiori*, there is no *ad hoc* training leading to them. They clearly show that employability is co-constructed

in the interaction between an individual and an organization through manpower pre-qualification mechanisms based on very general skills, followed by training and tutoring mechanisms. They also stress the fundamental role of work instructions and teaching tools that make learning, work, employment and thus employability possible. Employability is thus decided in the uncertainty during the recruitment process and then in the on-the-job training process. Risk and investment are at the heart of the approach. At the other end of the employee's "life cycle" in the company, Ève Saint-Germes offers, in Chapter 9, a dive into a world that is too often overlooked: that of outplacement units. Here again, employability appears to be the result of coordination between actors with different constraints: individuals looking for work after being made redundant, the employer who makes them redundant, the redeployment unit, the joint committee monitoring the redundancy plan and so on. We find the idea that employability is equipped with tools and gives rise to intense negotiations on measurement systems, the categorization of individuals leading to orientation towards a particular support measure, budgets and so on. Employability is not given, it is socially constructed. Chapter 10 closes this section. Sara Dotto, Patrick Gilbert, Florent Noël and Nathalie Raulet-Croset attempt to identify typical configurations in which production requirements, ways of defining the qualities of work and management systems for assessing and developing employability, are brought into line. The figure of the multi-skilled, available and opportunistic worker is only one model among others, alongside the worker with certified skills modeled on the stable requirements of standardized production or the worker included in networks within which the shared culture and affinities necessary for collaborative work are developed.

The approaches presented in the third part are based on structured and deliberate management systems: building tests, organizing training, monitoring the development of skills and so on. But employability is also built in the work situation in interactions with management and peers, in the learning of professional gestures, behavioral codes and the discovery of desirable opportunities. It is the whole organization that must be empowering. The contributions in the last part of the book return to the ideas developed upstream by presenting examples of companies undergoing change and tension, in which the work situation has a positive or negative influence on the employees' career path. The transformation of the SAE group's factories towards a factory of the future model, presented by Emmanuelle Garbe and Jérémy Vignal in Chapter 11, raises interesting questions about the employability of operators in the current context of digital transformation. Technological changes have led to fears of a polarization of the workforce, with super-operators, on the one hand, who are called upon to increase their skills in order to carry out the tasks of controlling and managing installations, and less qualified operators on the other, who may fear that their work will be de-skilled with them becoming servants of the machine. No one has been able to make valuable predictions that would help to cope with uncertainty. Dealing with these

transformations is a challenge that HR professional can hardly meet. But the other actors in play – workers and managers – can build their own solutions. Two illustrative cases are proposed in Chapters 12 and 13: the local managers of a large French group, followed like a shadow by Anne-Laure Delaunay, may also be concerned about the rapid technological changes they are experiencing. It is true that the proliferation of hardware tools (smartphones, tablets) and work applications may, at first glance, be perceived as a threat to jobs and skills. However, it generates opportunities for organizational tinkering, which are all the more fruitful as the tools are plastic and managers can appropriate them and define their use. In the end, the modernization of tools contributes to an increase in skills and the development of expertise that is particularly sought after internally and externally. The integration enterprise studied by Emmanuelle Begon and Michel Parlier is also constrained by production requirements. It is by exposing its employees to high-quality requirements, by involving them in participative and reflective management processes, and above all by not renouncing anything that an employer can and should expect from his employees that reinforces the feeling of efficiency in its fragile employees, develops their employability and remobilizes them towards sustainable employment. In this case, the very organization of work professionalizes the employee and enables him or her to “fully be a worker”.

We can see that talking about employability means thinking about cooperation between actors with different logics: public systems, HRM approaches, individual strategies and so on. All these actors have their role to play and their responsibilities to assume in solving fundamental problems: the fight against unemployment, labor shortages in “shortage” occupations, inclusion and emancipation of individuals, management of change, professional trajectories.

While these issues are at the forefront of the media and the daily life of organizations – redundancy plans, technical change, new forms of employment relationship – they have not yet found clear answers, either in research or in the practices that would form the basis of the professional activity of human resources managers or their union partners. Beyond the local experiments which this book has attempted to report on, no one really knows how to address these issues, negotiate employment and adjust skills. Each unique situation gives rise to its own unique management methods. The solutions found here and there are often presented as the result of encounters or opportunities that cannot be reproduced. These sensitive subjects are euphemistically described and it is often preferable to remain discreet about the solutions found, even when they are innovative, because discussing them would mean revisiting the often painful problems that gave rise to them or revealing certain aspects that could not be resolved in an honorable way. In short, learning remains rare, and the actors often “tinker” in the complexity of situations combining business strategies, economic constraints and human realities that are difficult to reconcile.

Nevertheless, some lessons can be drawn from the research presented here. Sustainable employability, which enables individuals to lead their professional lives, for themselves and without suffering, is located at the meeting point between three dimensions. It requires the mobilization of individual or collective resources that allow for the development of skills, and also for taking risks. It also implies working to enhance the value of individuals, which sometimes leads to a reconsideration of the way in which professional abilities are viewed by others and by the individuals themselves. It is as much about self-confidence as it is about building confidence. Finally, it involves exploring a wider universe of possibilities in order to detect happy opportunities.

