EMPLOYABILITY

Ideology, Policy, and Practice

Edited by Gretchen Purser, Rick Delbridge, Markus Helfen and Andreas Pekarek

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VOLUME 37

EMPLOYABILITY

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EMPLOYABILITY: IDEOLOGY, POLICY, AND PRACTICE

Edited by

GRETCHEN PURSER
Syracuse University, USA

RICK DELBRIDGE
Cardiff University, UK

MARKUS HELFEN
University of Labour, Germany

AND

ANDREAS PEKAREK
University of Melbourne, Australia

United Kingdom – North America – Japan
India – Malaysia – China

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ABOUT THE EDITORS

Gretchen Purser is an Associate Professor of Sociology at the Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs at Syracuse University. Her scholarship focuses broadly on the intersection between precarious work and the low-wage labour market and the reproduction and lived experience of urban poverty in the US. She uses ethnographic and/or community-based research methods to explore the changing nature of work and workers' movements as well as the ground-level practices of neoliberal poverty management. Her articles have appeared in leading journals such as *Ethnography*, *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, *Critical Sociology*, *Social Service Review*, *WorkingUSA*, and *Anthropology of Work Review*. She has received a wide variety of publication awards from the American Sociological Association and the Working Class Studies Association and serves as Associate Editor of both *Research in the Sociology of Work* and *Critical Sociology*.

Rick Delbridge is Professor of Organizational Analysis at Cardiff Business School and Co-convenor of the Centre for Innovation Policy Research, Cardiff University. He has research interests across various aspects of work, management, organization, and innovation in both private and public sector organizations and has published widely on these. Rick also has a long-standing interest in Japanese business and management and is currently undertaking work on traditional Japanese craft firms. He has been awarded best paper prizes by Academy of Management Review and Organization Studies. Rick has been elected to Fellowships of the Academy of Social Sciences, British Academy of Management, and the Learned Society of Wales.

Markus Helfen is a Professor of Strategy and Leadership at the University of Labour in Frankfurt (Main), Germany. He is a member of the Advisory Boards of the *German Journal of Human Resource Management* and the journal '*Industrielle Beziehungen – The German Journal of Industrial Relations'*. He has been a regular Co-convenor at the European Group of Organization Studies annual colloquia with the international research grouping 'Organization Studies and Industrial Relations'. He publishes in leading management and industrial relations journals like *Organization Studies*, *Human Relations*, and the *British Journal of Industrial Relations*. He does research in the fields of organization theory and employment relations with a focus on collective action, institutional work, and sustainability. Current research topics and projects include the humanization of work in the digital transformation and labour standards in global supply chains.

Andreas Pekarek is a Senior Lecturer in the Department of Management and Marketing at the University of Melbourne, Australia. Andi is fascinated by how people work, and his research has focused on how collective action by workers and their allies can steer the world of work in a more sustainable direction, towards fairness and social justice. His recent projects have centred on gig work in the platform economy, unions and industrial relations institutions, the HRM occupation, and interdisciplinary approaches to the study of work. Andi has published in such journals as *Industrial and Labor Relations Review*, *Organization, Human Resource Management Journal*, *British Journal of Industrial Relations*, and *New Technology*, *Work and Employment*. In addition to his role as Associate Editor for *Research in the Sociology of Work,* Andi serves on the editorial board of the *Journal of Industrial Relations* (Sage).

ABOUT THE CONTRIBUTORS

Pauline Anderson is Senior Lecturer in the Department of Work, Employment and Organisation, University of Strathclyde Business School. Pauline's research focuses on skills, jobs and working life, particularly labour market and 'just' transitions, the future of work, skill ecosystems and healthy workplaces and workers. Her research has a strong public policy/practice focus. She currently serves on the Climate Emergency Skills Action Plan (CESAP) Implementation Strategy Group (Scotland).

Dr Adam Barnard, PhD, has worked in Higher Education for over 20 years. During this time, he has worked with a variety of students and learners across educational contexts. He is Programme Leader for Professional Doctorates in Social Practice at Nottingham Trent University. His latest works are *Developing Professional Practice in Health and Social Care* (2019), *Key Themes in Health and Social Care* (2nd ed.) published by Routledge in 2023, and *Value Base of Social Work and Social Care* with Open University Press (2008). He has published articles on findings from his research in philosophy, political, and social theory. He is involved in the leadership and management of research in social science including ethics, governance, supervision, and curriculum development. He is currently teaching undergraduate and postgraduate Health and Social Care and Social Work programmes. He is committed to challenging policy, research, and practice that does not contribute to the ethical and value-based professionalism of frontline workers.

Phillip Brown is Professor Emeritus and previously Distinguished Research Professor at Cardiff University, UK. He's been studying the future of work across advanced and emerging economies over the last 25 years. Phil's interviewed many leading transnational companies and senior policy makers in countries including America, China, Finland, Germany, India, Singapore, and United Kingdom. He's also given keynote presentation in over 20 countries and authored and edited 18 books including *The Death of Human Capital?: Its Failed Promise and How to Renew it in an Age of Disruption* (2020). He Chaired a Review for the Welsh Government on digital innovation for the economy and the future of work, and sits on the Council of Management, National Institute of Economic and Social Research (NIESR), Westminster, London. He was Director of the Digital Futures Work Research Programme (https://digitalfuturesofwork.com/), and is currently writing a book on AI and the Future of Work.

Gabriel Ulbricht Ferreira is currently a Master's student in the Graduate Program in Sociology at the University of Campinas (Unicamp), Brazil. His research

focuses on young workers' experiences under neoliberal hegemony. He is also a current member of the Research Group 'Mundo do Trabalho e suas Metamorfoses (GPMT)'.

Dr Ricky Gee is an Associate Professor based in the Department of Social and Political Sciences at Nottingham Trent University. Ricky's research focuses on philosophical, sociological, and political dimensions of career, influenced by Derridean and decolonial thought. Ricky has teaching experience on a range of social science programmes at under and postgraduate levels and is a PhD supervisor.

Ian Greer is Research Professor at Cornell University's School of Industrial and Labor Relations and Director of the ILR Ithaca Co-Lab. His research looks at the intersection of industrial relations and welfare states in Europe and North America. He is the author of journal articles about offshoring, outsourcing, and insourcing in the auto industry, as well as privatization, active labour-market policies, and immigration. His latest book is *Marketization: How Capitalist Exchange Disciplines Workers and Subverts Democracy* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2022). Before working at Cornell, he worked in England at Leeds University and the University of Greenwich.

Scott A. Hurrell is Senior Lecturer in Human Resource Management and Employment Relations at the Adam Smith Business School, University of Glasgow. His research interests include: labour market transitions; skills and work organization; the effect of digital technologies on work; and fighting workplace inequalities. Scott also has an interest in critical realist approaches to studying work, employment, and organizations. He has conducted work for/funded by organizations in the public, private and non-profit sectors, including the Scottish Government.

Daria Luchinskaya is a Lecturer in the Department of Work, Employment and Organisation, University of Strathclyde Business School. Her research interests are in graduate transitions to employment, skill development and skill utilization, and in using mixed-methods research approaches. Previously, Daria was a Research Fellow at the Institute for Employment Research, University of Warwick, and a Research Associate at Wales Public Services 2025 hosted by Cardiff Business School.

Amy Morrell has many years of experience in lecturing and course leadership within the field of Health and Social Care. She has delivered a wide range of courses in colleges, schools, and higher education settings. She is currently a Senior Lecturer and Course Leader at Nottingham Trent University. Her scholarship focuses on engaging under-represented groups in higher education and the role of inclusive assessment practices in scaffolding achievement for all students.

Manuel Nicklich is a Sociologist and Postdoctoral Researcher at the Nuremberg Campus of Technology. His research interests focus on digital and/or ecological transformation and its relationship to the organization of work. Manuel has published in journals such as the *Journal of Professions and Organization*, the *European Journal of Industrial Relations*, the *Berlin Journal of Critical Theory* and *Work Organisation, Labour & Globalisation*.

Belgin Okay-Somerville is Senior Lecturer of Human Resource Management at the Adam Smith Business School, University of Glasgow. Her research interests include employability, skills utilization and job quality, career transitions, chance events and employee wellbeing, especially among younger workers. Belgin is the Youth Employment Lead of the European Association of Work and Organizational Psychology Impact Incubator (EAWOPii) and an Associate Editor of EAWOP In Practice.

Michael Reed is Professor of Organizational Analysis, Management, Employment and Organization, Cardiff Business School, Cardiff University, UK. His research interests are focused on the changing power dynamics between organizational elites, experts, and managers across a range of organizational fields and institutional environments. He has also contributed to the development and deployment of a 'critical realist' approach within contemporary organization studies and is a founding editor of the journal *Organization*.

Christine Anne Reilly is a Senior Lecturer in the School of Business and Creative Industries at the University of the West of Scotland in the United Kingdom. Her research interests include employability, labour markets, and the role of the third sector in supporting individuals to prepare for work. Her PhD focused on the relationship between volunteering and paid work and built on her previous experience as a researcher in the third sector in Scotland. She has published in the *International Journal of Entrepreneurial Behaviour* and *Entrepreneurship and Innovation*.

Dora Scholarios is Professor of Work Psychology at University of Strathclyde Business School. Her research interests include the relationship between HRM practice and employee health and wellbeing, recruitment and selection, and youth transitions into employment. She was one of the Editors-in-Chief of the *Human Resource Management Journal* from 2016 to 2020 and is currently a member of several journal editorial boards and professional associations in the fields of psychology, and business and management. She is also a Chartered Psychologist.

Tilly South is a policy professional with experience in applied research and advocacy across a broad range of government, non-profit, and research organizations. Her research focuses on the structures and systems underpinning unpaid

internships and the higher education system, and their intersection with the concepts of employability and neoliberalism.

Gerbrand Tholen is a Reader in Sociology at City St George's, University of London. His research interests include the graduate labour market, skills, educational credentials, higher education, occupational change, recruitment and selection, and the future of work. He is the author of *Graduate Work: Skills, Credentials, Careers, and Labour Markets* (Oxford University Press, 2017), *Modern Work and the Marketisation of Higher Education* (Policy Press, 2022), and *The Role of Neoliberalism in the Marketisation of Higher Education* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2024).

CHAPTER 1

THE ENIGMA OF EMPLOYABILITY

Gretchen Purser[a], Rick Delbridge[b], Markus Helfen[c] and Andreas Pekarek[d]

[a]*Syracuse University, USA*
[b]*Cardiff University, UK*
[c]*University of Labour, Germany*
[d]*University of Melbourne, Australia*

ABSTRACT

In this introduction to the volume, we explore the topic of employability, arguing that it has an enigmatic character that renders it in dire need of sustained, critical analysis. We provide a framework for thinking about the enigma of employability – as ideology, policy, and practice. We then introduce the chapters that make up this volume, guiding readers through the differing theoretical perspectives and empirical settings and highlighting what we see as its central contributions.

Keywords: Employability; enigma; neoliberalism; education; work; unemployment

The starting point for this volume is that employability is something of an enigma. It's an increasingly referenced concept – commonplace in labour market policy, human resource management, educational institutions, and unions alike – but its precise meaning remains unclear. What *is* employability? That employability is elusive and hard to pin down does not render it any less potent of a force. Indeed, in a Durkheimian sense, employability is a social fact, something that – we are told – can and should be cultivated. But while the concept itself carries this moral

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force (i.e. it is something to which we are obligated), it nevertheless remains an empty or at least ambiguous signifier.

Employability refers to an amorphous concoction of personal attributes that purportedly make someone likely to gain and maintain employment. These attributes go beyond hard skills to encompass things like attitude, agility, flexibility, emotional intelligence, resilience, initiative, and character. In so far as employability is framed as an attribute of a person, individuals can be measured and assessed accordingly, lauded as 'employable' or lambasted as 'unemployable'. The precise criteria of employability are never specified, nor in a dynamic market and rapidly changing world can one ever be employable enough (Cremin, 2009). For individuals, then, employability is something to be endlessly pursued, but not something that can ever be secured once and for all, as in older conceptions of making a 'career'. Employability becomes a project of self-improvement, in which one increasingly tries to mould one's self to the fluctuating demands of the market.

Employability is not just an enigmatic concept, but operates as a pervasive and pernicious ideology. It offers a simplistic supply-side explanation, or diagnosis, for the problem of unemployment. Although no degree of employability can guarantee adequate employment, the lack of employment can always be chalked up to one's fledgling or inadequate employability. Employability is thus intensely individualizing, encouraging us to shift our attention away from the vicissitudes of the market and the changing character of employment and towards our personal strengths and shortcomings. In this sense, the ideology of employability is at the core of broader neoliberal doctrines of individual responsibility and commodification of the self. Employability demands that individuals properly orient themselves to the market and that they take full responsibility for their failures and shortcomings.

It should come as little surprise that the language and logic of employability have exploded in popularity precisely at a time when the concept of employment itself is dissolving. As work becomes more and more precarious, as employment becomes more and more fissured, as growing numbers of workers fall outside the bounds of existing employment protections, and those who are in work see their lifeworld subordinated to ensuring the continuation of employment, workers are admonished by managers, teachers, and politicians alike to enhance their employability, to focus endlessly on themselves to increase their suitability, adaptability, and desirability in an ever-shifting labour market. The ideology of employability beckons individuals to prepare and orient themselves not only for the jobs of today, but for the anticipated, albeit never assured, jobs of tomorrow. The target keeps moving, and one is never good enough.

Nowhere is the ideology of employability more clearly promulgated than in welfare state and labour market policy. In the US, the UK, Germany and beyond, the state provides funds to nonprofit and for profit programmes which focus on helping individuals navigate and maximize their chances in the labour market, through training, job coaching, and all kinds of cultural reprogramming for those deemed hard to employ (Purser & Hennigan, 2018). Employability programmes thus abound as a dominant response to poverty and unemployment.

Employability has similarly come to dominate schooling, shifting the practices and priorities of vocational training programmes and higher education institutions. Universities and schools increasingly offer 'career readiness' certification and subordinate academic aspirations to projected employer demands for ever-more 'employable' job candidates. The intrinsic value of education has been instrumentally rationalized with 'worth' defined in terms of the expected earnings of graduates from different disciplines. Exemplifying the subordination of schools and universities to the employability agenda, for instance, US President Donald Trump, laying out his educational agenda in the run-up to the 2024 election, declared: 'Rather than indoctrinating young people with inappropriate racial, sexual, and political material, which is what we're doing now, our schools must be totally refocused to prepare our children to succeed in the world of work' (Lobosco & Cole, 2024).

In our view, a concept as fuzzy yet as forceful as employability merits rigorous study and critique. We must continue to examine the ideology of employability and how it is both reproduced and resisted. We must interrogate policies that are enacted under the guise of employability as well as how these vary across differing political and cultural contexts. And we must empirically investigate the specific practices, carried out by individuals and institutions alike, to enhance employability. This volume positions employability at the centre of scholarship on work, education, and political economy. We hope it will prompt readers to think about employability in new ways and via new analytical frameworks. We also hope it leaves readers with fresh lines of inquiry to pursue in future research.

AN OVERVIEW OF THE CHAPTERS

This volume offers a detailed examination into this now ubiquitous, but underexamined, concept of employability. It compiles a set of papers that examine employability – as ideology, policy, and practice – via a range of empirical methods and a variety of theoretical frameworks. The papers document how the language and logic of employability have upended individual experiences, organizational practices, institutional priorities, and the workings of labour markets.

In Chapter 2, Tilly South explores how the popularization of employability – in neoliberal discourse and policy – has given rise to the proliferation of unpaid internships. While internships are promoted as opportunities for the enhancement of employability, South contends that we know relatively little about how interns themselves experience and view their internships. Drawing upon in-depth interviews with 38 student and graduate interns in Australia, South finds that external factors and influences heavily impact interns' experiences. Although interns seem to readily embrace the necessity to be 'enterprising selves' and are resigned to having to bear the burden of enhancing their employability through unpaid internships, they encounter a range of impediments to these goals from both employers and universities. Many employers, South finds, have shifted away from training altogether and simply treat interns as free labour. Universities, as they turn to work-integrated learning programmes and industry partnerships,

frequently require internships for formal degree requirements, yet offer little in the way of guidance or support. Interns are often left vulnerable to exploitation or mired in poor-quality experiences, particularly given that they have little to no knowledge of regulations and policies pertaining to their rights as interns or the responsibilities of their employers. Tilly concludes with an impassioned call to 'radically overhaul the policies, structures, and ideologies that drive these unregulated, unstructured arrangements'.

Coauthored by a team of researchers in the UK, Scott A. Hurrell, Pauline Anderson, Daria Luchinskaya, Dora Scholarios, and Belgin Okay-Somerville, Chapter 3 focuses on the COVID-19 pandemic as a sudden 'career shock' that disrupted the 'best laid plans' of university graduates. The authors borrow and build on the concept of reflexivity as developed by Margaret Archer to explain how individuals reflect upon their changing circumstances and attempt to exert agency. They draw upon qualitative survey data from 399 graduates to explore how reflexivity influences their career agency, as indicated by their perceived employability and early career outcomes. This focus on perceived employability is itself a contribution; as we saw in the preceding chapter, students increasingly perceive unpaid internships as requirements for employability. Using Archer's typology, the authors find considerable evidence that graduates found ways to agentically adapt to career shock. They also find that one out of nine graduates evidenced fractured reflexivity and found themselves paralyzed, even traumatized, by the sudden shift in circumstance. Finally, the authors develop what they advance as a novel contribution to Archer's typology, a mode they call confounded reflexivity, wherein graduates' pursuit of their chosen careers was halted, but without feelings of trauma. This chapter directs our attention to individuals' modes of reflexivity and how these shape perceived employability and career outcomes in times of societal crisis.

In the fourth chapter, Phillip Brown and Gerbrand Tholen turn their attention to the much discussed 'future of work', given technological innovations such as generative AI. Based on occupational trend data from the US and the UK, they challenge the 'labour scarcity' view of employability (the dominant belief that we need to better educate and train the workforce) and emphasize instead a 'job scarcity' view of employability (pointing to a different understanding of the education-work relationship, one which recognizes a growing structural mismatch between employment opportunities and workers' skills). They show that the threat of a jobless future is highly exaggerated, and that technological innovation has not eliminated low-skill 'routine' jobs, nor does it necessarily warrant a more 'educated' workforce. They draw upon the data to critique predominant supply-side policies aimed at bolstering employability. Instead, they call upon policymakers to address the crisis of job quality head-on, via things like new wage and labour standards, protections against job degradation, increased support for collective bargaining, and frameworks for portable benefits. Overall, this chapter makes a crucial contribution to this volume by shifting the focus of employability from a problem of the individual to a problem of the structural conditions of the capitalist labour market and thus of policy makers and employers.

Manuel Nicklich, in Chapter 5, further dissects the relationship between employability and education. He argues that advancements in digital technologies have given rise to efforts to reform vocational education. But these reforms have obscured the broader relevance of education to society as a whole. Drawing upon the work of critical theorists Horkheimer and Adorno, Nicklich argues that the focus on employability has rendered vocational education in Germany more and more instrumental and detached from personal development and learning. This increased instrumentality means vocational education focuses on the mere acquisition of work-related skills and one's marketability, discounting other forms of personal growth that might be pursued. For Nicklich, the rise of employability has fundamentally turned vocational education into something one-dimensional: a space of training and adaptation to work and not, for example, a space for the production of an engaged industrial citizenry.

In Chapter 6, Ricky Gee, Amy Morrell and Adam Barnard present an original analysis of what is happening in the field of higher education in the UK. They examine the rise of the employability agenda within British universities since the start of the 21st century. Universities must now meet certain metrics on the Graduate Outcomes Survey (GOS) – 60% of graduates in a 'high skill destination' – to prove their 'progress' in relation to enhancing students' employability. The authors lay out a biting critique of what they view as the colonial character of employability, which they trace back to the career development literature. They scrutinize the designation of 'high skill' categories of employment and the consequent devaluation of care work, documenting the impact that this has not only in terms of narrowing the university curricula, but in terms of constructing an occupational hierarchy that reproduces the structural disadvantage of minoritized groups. They advocate for a decolonial critique of higher education that can both subvert the employability discourse and challenge its neoliberal logic.

At this point in the volume, readers can likely cast a sceptical eye on claims that various programmes improve employability. Chapter 7 by Christine Anne Reilly addresses this head on, acknowledging that the outcomes of employability initiatives – devolved by the state and delivered by an array of non-profit or third sector organizations – are often difficult to identify and measure. She thus turns her focus to the applied question of how employability interventions can be evaluated based on the broader criteria of social value, as is now encouraged by the UK and Scottish governments. This chapter will thus be of particular relevance to those interested in policy implementation and policy evaluation. Reilly focuses her analysis on an evaluation framework that was implemented into an employability programme in Scotland called Routes to Work. She documents how the programme is implementing this evaluation framework and incorporating evidence of 'what works' into ongoing service delivery. She concludes that despite the serious critiques of employability, locally-embedded third sector organizations such as this one are vitally important in so far as they offer a range of support to marginalized people.

Informed by his own extensive international comparative fieldwork in Europe and drawing upon the theoretical perspectives of Marx and Polanyi, Ian Greer, in

Chapter 8, reflects on the growing body of literature on the political economy and organization of employability. He argues that efforts to promote employability via recommodification policies of the welfare state are part of a broader project of class discipline. He examines the common features of such recommodification policies, arguing that we must go beyond mere policy analysis and examine the working conditions and organizational dynamics faced by the frontline workers of employment services charged with policy implementation. In doing so, Greer argues that recommodification policies increase competition, or marketization, amongst both claimants of benefits and street-level bureaucrats (Lipsky 2010 [1980]). Greer contends that the work of recommodifying labour power is rife with contradiction and often results in the opposite of its intended effect: further marginalization. Ultimately, Greer calls upon scholars to listen to working class people and join their resistance to such disciplinary policies.

In Chapter 9, Michael Reed offers an extended review of Ian Greer and Charles Umney's book, *Marketization, How Capitalist Exchange Disciplines Workers and Subverts Democracy*. Reed praises the book as an exemplar of the revival of Marxist analysis in the sociology of work. Its 'leitmotif' according to Reed, is Greer and Umney's analysis of how capitalism's creative and innovative potential is captured through collective agency directed at reshaping employment systems and work organizations in ways that reinforce neoliberalization. While the book offers a trenchant critique of 'marketization' and its underlying agenda of strengthening class discipline, Reed notes that the authors could have given more sustained attention to the various ways in which workers resist this discipline.

Anchoring the 'Spotlight on Ethnography' portion of this volume is Gabriel Ulbricht Ferreira's final chapter 'From the Ruins of a Precarious World of Work: Entrepreneurial Ambitions in Young Brazilian Workers' Experiences.' Ferreira analyzes the experiences and narratives of three young workers in São Paulo, Brazil, all of whom aspire to become entrepreneurs. These dreams of entrepreneurship, Ferreira shows, emerge out of the ruins of the precarious world of work, a world which offers little in the way of autonomy, dignity, or material security. All three of these workers have cycled between abusive bosses, spells of unemployment, and the false promises of gig work. They see entrepreneurship not so much as an opportunity, but as a last-ditch survival strategy. Ferreira argues that this embrace of making one's own job by being one's own boss reveals the hegemony of neoliberal thought and the normalization of unstable work relations.

CONCLUSION

As in volume 36, in which we explored the concept of 'essentiality' in relation to work, this volume focuses on one of the most popular buzzwords in the neoliberal landscape of labour: 'employability.' Employability is now central to scholarship on work, education, and political economy. As this volume demonstrates, it is

attracting more and more attention from scholars across the globe: from Australia to the UK to Western Europe to the USA to Latin America. The contributors to this volume demonstrate the utility of thinking critically about employability, drawing on an eclectic range of theoretical frameworks, from Marxism to post-colonialism to critical theory and beyond. Furthermore, the volume demonstrates that interrogating employability can be a means of examining many of the larger themes in the sociology of work, including class discipline, worker identity, precarity, unemployment, labour market intermediaries, and welfare state policy.

Still, much remains to be done. What, for instance, are the gendered and racialized impacts of popular and political discourses of, and demands for, employability? To what extent have 'anti-work' politics and/or 'post-work' imaginaries tempered the ideological effects and practical pursuit of employability (Weeks, 2011)? How have unions responded to the rise of employability? How have work organizations and human resource management practices been impacted by the logic of employability? How can we best assess and make sense of the variability across organizations that purport to enhance clients' employability? Have employability policies and practices led to new alliances between, and forms of resistance by, education and labour activists? Our primary hope is that this volume, in showcasing some of the most promising streams of research on this topic, serves as a springboard for future lines of inquiry that continue to critically interrogate the enigmatic character of employability and challenge its pernicious effects on individuals seeking to navigate the vicissitudes of their employment.

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