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Prepare and pursue: Routes to suitable (re-)employment

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SUMMARY



Unemployment often is a highly negative experience. Not only does unemployment entail a loss of income, identity and social networks, it also has a number of negative physical and psychological consequences that become increasingly stronger as the time of unemployment lengthens (cf. Paul & Moser, 2009; Wanberg, 2012). Moreover, unemployment is a costly problem for societies in terms of economy production, the social welfare system, and expensive interventions to speed up the process of reemployment. It is thus of utmost importance to both society and unemployed people themselves to find reemployment as soon as possible. At the same time, however, finding reemployment in itself does not necessarily constitute a successful reemployment process. Because a suitable and qualitatively good job is far more likely to foster stable and long-lasting reemployment than just *any* job, we should look beyond finding reemployment as an outcome and consider the perceived quality of the job obtained. Only then can we genuinely speak of successful reemployment.

Obviously, when pursuing suitable reemployment, putting time and effort in job search activities is necessary. Indeed, research on finding (re-)employment dictates that the key to finding a job is searching for one (e.g. Kanfer et al., 2001; Van Hooft et al., 2004; Wanberg et al., 2002; Wanberg et al., 2010). But what if searching for a job does not result in reemployment? What if the economy is tough and suitable vacancies are scarce? What if someone faces personal barriers or stigma associated with being unemployed? And what if the aim is to find a suitable and qualitatively good job, instead of just any job?

In many of these cases, searching for a job is not enough to foster reemployment success. As a matter of fact, there are two key problems with the focus on job search. First, job search intensity is relatively weakly related to finding reemployment, and the range of variables related to job search can explain little variance in reemployment success (Kanfer et al., 2001; Wanberg et al., 2002; Wanberg, 2012). Second, spending more time and effort on job search does not result in better reemployment quality: most of the relationships between the amount of job search and measures of reemployment quality are near zero, indicating that a greater job search does not necessarily result in a more desirable employment situation (Boswell et al., 2012; Wanberg, 2012). This leaves us with the question of what one can do to establish successful reemployment when job search does not suffice. Accordingly, the aim of this dissertation is to examine which

factors can contribute to successful reemployment in situations where job search is not enough. In other words, which routes can successfully lead to suitable (re-) employment?

In this dissertation, I propose that these routes can be found in people's employability (i.e., their skills, knowledge and attitudes that together form the possibility to find and keep a job, cf. Fugate, et al., 2004). More specifically, I propose that employability and its dimensions contribute to people's reemployment success, above and beyond how hard they search. The concept of employability taps into the two key problems mentioned above. First, employability might play an important role in establishing successful reemployment, especially among long-term unemployed and other at risk groups. Second, employability might contribute to (re-) employment quality and give people the possibility to deploy better search methods and to persist in searching. In that sense, a focus on employability can kill two birds with one stone: it may contribute to reemployment success and job search simultaneously, maximizing job seekers' chances on successfully finding reemployment. Yet, it has not empirically been shown *if, how* and *why* employability and its dimensions play a role in fostering genuine reemployment success. In the present dissertation, I seek to answer these questions. Additionally, I investigate how reemployment interventions contribute to people's employability in the reemployment process.

Empirical Findings

In Chapter 2, I investigated *if* and *how* employability can serve as a possible route to reemployment success in cases where job search does not suffice. More specifically, Chapter 2 examined whether employability could foster job search and the chance on finding reemployment above and beyond the barriers that long-term unemployed people so often face. To this purpose, I surveyed a group of long-term unemployed people at two points in time set one year apart. The results showed that employability does indeed contribute to long-term unemployed people's job search and to their chances on finding reemployment. As expected, finding reemployment largely depended on long-term unemployed people's employability and only slightly on their job search activities. The latter finding supports the idea that solely searching for a job is insufficient to find reemployment for long-term unemployed people. Instead, it is

particularly employability that is important for a successful reemployment process. The findings of Chapter 2 furthermore showed that each dimension of employability plays an important yet distinct role in the reemployment process, with adaptability being crucial in persisting in job search, social and human capital being crucial in finding reemployment, and career identity being crucial for both.

Chapter 2 also examined whether governmental reemployment interventions contributed to the development of long-term unemployed people's employability. The results showed that reemployment interventions did contribute to people's development of employability, but that the effects were relatively small. To examine why some people benefit more from a reemployment course than others, I proposed in Chapter 3 that participants' heterogeneous reasons to take part in the intervention –i.e., their quality of motivation, as depicted in Self-Determination Theory (SDT; Deci & Ryan, 1985, 2000)– could explain the varying course outcomes. I proposed that a more internalized motivation for finding reemployment would foster the acquisition of employability and job search during and after the course. The internalization of motivation, in turn, may depend on people's perceived choice to take part in the reemployment course and its experienced usefulness. To test these assumptions, I asked participants of a compulsory reemployment course to fill out a questionnaire before and after the course.

Results showed that a more internalized motivation was indeed associated with higher employability and job search intensity after the reemployment course. The results furthermore showed interaction effects of perceived choice and experienced usefulness on motivation quality and course outcomes: perceived choice only had the expected positive effect when the reemployment course was experienced as useful for finding reemployment, but surprisingly, perceived choice had a negative effect when the reemployment course was experienced as useless for finding reemployment. These findings imply that the experienced usefulness of a reemployment course is essential for participants' motivation and course effectiveness. Without it, a compulsory course was likely to result in a more controlled (i.e., less internalized) motivation and lower employability and job search after the course. I therefore concluded that the compulsory nature of a reemployment course is not necessarily detrimental for its effectiveness, as long as participants consider the course useful for finding reemployment.

An interesting result in Chapter 3 was that participants' career identity decreased over time. Given the important role of career identity in the reemployment process, I took a closer look at the dynamics of career identity in Chapter 4 by exploring why and how career identity can be built among unemployed young adults with interrupted career trajectories (i.e., career trajectories characterized by many spells of unemployment). I interviewed 30 disadvantaged unemployed youth during their participation in a unique apprentice program ("Jamie Oliver's Fifteen"). Their narratives revealed two main findings regarding the motives ('why') and methods ('how') of building career identity. First, apprentices' motives for applying for the program were often serendipitous and less deliberate than one would expect from research on employability and reemployment. Second, career identity could be built through different methods, such as discovering competence, identifying with or distinguishing from the group, and comparing alternative identities. Some additional quantitative analyses showed that participants who had found stable employment referred to serendipity as a reason for participating just as much, if not more, as those who were unemployed or had unstable employment one year after graduation. These quantitative analyses also suggested that methods that help to withdraw from the former, stigmatized identity of being unemployed are most beneficial for the subsequent reemployment process. Additionally, none of the participants who had found stable employment portrayed a lack of career identity construction in their narratives. I concluded from these findings that successful reemployment requires building one's career identity, but also that the motives underlying this process can be rather serendipitous.

In investigating the role of employability in fostering genuine reemployment success, I took a closer look at the dimension of adaptability to answer *why* employability may lead to genuine reemployment success. I proposed that the dimension of adaptability –when regarded as preparation in the reemployment process– may provide people with resources that can result in better job search methods and better employment quality. Chapter 5 therefore examined the impact of career adaptability on different job search strategies that people use in the pursuit of (re-) employment, and assumed that the quality of reemployment would be better predicted by the strategies that people use during their job search than solely by the intensity with

which they search. These job search strategies were classified into exploratory, focused and haphazard strategies (Crossley & Highhouse, 2005; Stevens & Beach, 1996). I tested the hypotheses by assessing the career adaptability and job search strategies of participants of a reemployment course, as well as the number of job offers they had received and their reemployment quality eight months later. Results showed that a focused and exploratory strategy increased the number of job-offers, but also that an exploratory strategy decreased reemployment quality in this particular sample. The latter may be explained by the fact that the use of an exploratory strategy may lead people to apply widely for different types of jobs that may not always suit their respective needs nor offer a truly satisfying experience. In that sense, it is important to note that career adaptability did positively affect reemployment quality: while the use of one or the other strategy was a function of people's level of career adaptability, some career adaptability resources also had a direct positive effect on reemployment quality. This strengthened my idea that career adaptability plays a crucial and preparatory role in the (re-)employment process.

Given the possibly preparatory role of career adaptability in the pursuit of high quality reemployment, I developed a training to provide university graduates with these career adaptability resources and to foster their employment quality. In Chapter 6, I proposed that the career adaptability resources may provide the necessary 'tools' to cope with the transition from school to work and to help university graduates to find a suitable job, even during economically hard times. I developed and tested a theory-driven training that should contribute to graduates' career adaptability and subsequent employment quality, and aimed to answer the question as to whether career adaptability is malleable. The training was tested in a longitudinal field quasi-experiment among recent university graduates, by studying the differences in the development of each dimension of career adaptability between an experimental group and a control group, over three points in time (pre-training, post-training and a follow-up measurement). Results revealed that the development of career control, career concern and career curiosity was significantly different between both groups, with the training group showing an increase where the control group remained the same or decreased. Interestingly, the differences between training group and control group were significantly stronger at the follow-up measurement 6 months after the training. Results

furthermore showed that employed participants who had taken part in the training reported higher employment quality (higher job satisfaction, lower turnover intentions, higher person-organization fit and higher career success) than employed participants who had not taken part in the training. I concluded that the training provided participants with career adaptability resources and helped to buffer against a decrease of career adaptability –mainly in the long run. The fact that the training contributed to the quality of employment found, confirmed the idea that career adaptability is essential in fostering employment quality.

Conclusions and Implications

There is a widespread consensus in reemployment research and -practice that the best route to finding a job is searching for one. However, searching hard for a job is often not enough in times of economic crisis or for long-term and disadvantaged unemployed people, nor does it necessarily result in better reemployment quality (Boswell et al., 2012; Kanfer et al., 2001; Wanberg et al., 2002). The aim of this dissertation was therefore to designate the routes to genuine reemployment success. To this purpose, I proposed that the concept of employability may play an important role in establishing successful reemployment, especially among long-term unemployed people and other at risk groups. Additionally, I proposed that one of the dimensions of employability in particular –adaptability– can serve as a preparatory mechanism that contributes to the quality of reemployment.

By examining each dimension of employability separately among different types of samples with different methods, I was able to answer if, how and why employability fosters genuine reemployment success. The results of Chapter 2, 3 and 4 show that employability and its dimensions do indeed contribute to both job search and finding reemployment among the long-term unemployed, and that employability can be enhanced through reemployment interventions –as long as these interventions are useful for finding reemployment (Chapter 3) and yield opportunities for constructing a career identity (Chapter 4). Chapter 5 and 6 furthermore confirm that preparation in the (re-)employment process by means of career adaptability can influence the way in which people search for jobs and the subsequent quality of (re-) employment –both for long-term unemployed people pursuing reemployment and for higher educated

graduates who have just entered the labor market. Together, the findings in this dissertation yield conclusive evidence that employability offers a comprehensive approach to fostering genuine reemployment success: a focus on employability provides a better route to finding suitable reemployment than a focus on job search alone. Whether we look at regular job seekers, the long-term unemployed, stigmatized disadvantaged young adults or university graduates, employability and its separate dimensions are not only crucial, but also provide a sensible route to suitable reemployment.

What do these findings and conclusions in this dissertation mean for the pursuit of suitable (re-)employment? First of all, the results yield new information on the distinct roles of the employability dimensions in the reemployment process, with human and social capital being particularly important for reemployment outcomes, career identity being particularly important for the reemployment process, and adaptability being important for both the process and the outcomes. Chapter 2's results show that career identity plays a crucial role in the pursuit of reemployment by fostering both job search and the chance on finding reemployment. Interestingly, rebuilding career identity after a period of unemployment does not necessarily have to be a goal-directed or deliberate process, nor has to arise from one's own initiative. Rather, the key to building career identity and finding stable employment seems to lie in different social identification and discrimination processes.

Second, this dissertation shows that career adaptability can function as a preparatory mechanism in establishing (re-)employment quality, and is relevant among all sorts of job seekers –including the poorly educated or long-term unemployed. In essence, higher levels of career adaptability go together with better job search methods, which in turn can increase people's chances on finding suitable (re-)employment. In fact, providing these career adaptability resources can help job seekers to enhance and maintain their career adaptability in the long run, and therefore to handle any current or future vocational transitions more easily. This is especially useful in today's dynamic economy, as career adaptability enables people to adapt to constantly changing career-related circumstances.

Third, this dissertation provides some recommendations for the effectiveness of

reemployment interventions. Given the importance of employability in the reemployment process, a person-adaptive approach in which interventions aim to develop the necessary dimensions of people's employability may be beneficial. At the same time, results have pointed out that the 'why' of motivation for finding reemployment is important for the utility of reemployment courses. Chapter 3 shows that obligating people to participate does not have to be detrimental for the quality of their motivation, their employability and job search activities, as long as they can see the usefulness of what they are doing. It is therefore all the more important for reemployment practice to explain why a course is useful for finding reemployment to enhance the utility of such a course.

Finally, it is noteworthy that the important role of employability and career adaptability is not bound to a specific sample or situation. In fact, the findings discussed in this dissertation are consistent among different types of samples and different types of methodologies. In that sense, this dissertation offers a robust and comprehensive approach to genuine reemployment success. The employability perspective therewith answers to the call in un- and reemployment research to deepen our understanding of the reemployment process, and to look beyond reemployment status as an outcome but consider the quality of the reemployment found.

In conclusion, I have shown in this dissertation that there are routes besides job search that can lead to suitable (re-)employment. Employability is –by providing both the resources to engage and persist in proper job search methods and to eventually land suitable reemployment– a more fruitful route when pursuing genuine reemployment success. Moreover, particularly preparation (i.e., career adaptability) is essential for the quality of (re-)employment. Thus, in the pursuit of suitable (re-)employment, employability and preparation are the right routes for maximizing the chances on finding a suitable job.