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Employability and self-regulation in contemporary careers

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Abstract

As they have become increasingly boundaryless, contemporary careers are often depicted as ones wherein workers are employable, proactive, and self-regulative. Reorganization and technological innovations are only some of the developments that contemporary careers face. An often agreed upon definition of employability is: being able to gain and maintain work, both within and across organizations. The employability concept is characterized for its shifts in meaning throughout time, depending on changing labor market conditions and government policies. In addition, several scientific contributions emphasize different aspects of employability. The concept of self-regulation can bridge the gap between several employability theories, in the sense that different employability approaches (different contexts) are all results-oriented, that a performance orientation and a learning orientation are both relevant and that they assume the deployment of strategies and the removing of obstacles to get to the result. This chapter deals with employability approaches in some frequently occurring work situations: the unemployment context, the organizational context, and the reorganizational context. Furthermore, practical implications for career counseling, and guidance for contemporary careers—wherein employability and career self-management fulfill important roles—are provided.

1. Introduction

Contemporary careers, are often depicted as ones wherein workers are employable, self-regulative, proactive, and eager to learn. They experience horizontal career moves beside vertical ones, and move easily between departments and organizations. In reality, not all careers do have a boundaryless or protean character. Changing organizations and functions often correlates with factors such as educational level, type of education, line of work, niche, function specific developments, and other work and socio-economic contextual factors. In contemporary careers though, in general, workers do meet a larger array and multiplicity of changes, and as a result will have to take responsibility to frequently reevaluate and make adjustments to their careers (self-steer, called self-management or self-regulation) (King 2004; Strauss, Griffin, & Parker, 2012).

Some of the challenges that contemporary workers face nowadays (e.g. Rousseau, 1997) are reorganization, frequent technological innovations, telework, job rotations, aging and dejuvenization. Employability seems to be an answer. In several publications, employability has been associated with the capacity to get and hold on to employment, both within and across organizations (e.g. Finn, 2000; Fugate & Kinicki, 2008; McArdle, Waters, Briscoe, & Hall, 2007; Rothwell & Arnold, 2007). Rothwell & Arnold (2007) developed and validated a perceived employability measure that reflects the self-valuation of employability within and outside the person's current organization, based on one's personal and occupational attributes (p. 40). Although formulated from an individual gain perspective, employability also has been regarded to be advantageous for organizations, since employable individuals are flexible, (e.g.

Rothwell & Arnold, 2007; Van der Heijde & Van der Heijden, 2006; Van Dam, 2004), implying a win-win situation.

In this chapter, an overview of theories on employability and self-regulation are presented, including operationalizations and validated measurement instruments, for different contemporary career contexts. The concept of self-regulation has been proven useful in several domains, such as work and organizational psychology, education science, sports psychology and health science. In addition to a positive relationship with results (e.g. work performance, transfer of training), self-regulation has been found to be positively related to health and wellbeing (e.g. John & Gross, 2004). In the first section, a self-regulation approach to employability is presented, the second section proceeds with employability approaches in some frequently occurring work and career environment situations including some employability operationalizations and instruments, and in the final section, special attention is paid to practical implications for career counseling and guidance.

2. Self-regulation approaches to employability

Various theories and definitions of employability, that have surfaced since the emergence of the concept, around 1955, have neatly illustrated its multidimensional or variegated character (e.g. Van der Heijde & Van der Heijden, 2006). Changing labor market conditions and government policies have brought shifts in its meaning, and several authors have emphasized different aspects of the concept (e.g. Rothwell & Arnold, 2007). One criticism of the employability concept is that it is fuzzy: that it has too many meanings (e.g. Nauta, 2011; Rothwell & Arnold, 2007). In the literature we find different elaborations of employability depending on the context such as the unemployment context, the organizational context, the organizational change context,

and the new entrants context. In that sense employability can be defined as: how to function as effectively, efficiently and healthily as possible within a given (un)employment context (now and in the future).

The first similarity between the employability and self-regulation concepts is that they are both outcome or results-oriented, Porath and Bateman (2006) quote effective self-regulation as “the ability to flexibly apply as many different resources and skills as necessary to achieve a goal”. In their opinion both dispositional (e.g. Lee, Sheldon, & Turban, 2003) and situational components are important to this process, that is not about stable personality traits but “manageable behavior”. Self-regulation can bridge the gap between several employability theories, in the sense that different employability approaches (that emerged from studying the concept within different contexts) are all results-oriented (and in that sense concern: bringing about or adapting to change). In one case the result is the acquisition of a job, in the other case high production, a high quality product or service or an increase in assignments and clients, an adaptation in an organizational change context or graduation -all manifestations of career success.

Self-regulation is of an agentic nature and concerns motivational processes that steer the allocation of resources with regard to the attainment of certain goals, both concerning on and off task activities, and consists both of cognitive as well as emotional aspects (e.g. Baumeister & Heatherton, 1996; Lee et al., 2003; Sokol & Müller, 2007). Employability could be regarded a career-related elaboration of Baumeister and Heatherton's (1996), feedback-loop model, in which self-regulation consists of three ingredients: 1) standards, 2) monitoring and 3) bringing about change (operate phase).

Several initiatives in work and organizational psychology describe comparable processes. The future work self (Strauss, Griffin, & Parker, 2012), a mental representation of oneself in the

future regarding hopes and aspirations in relation to work, seems to be positively related to a person's proactive career behavior. The study provides initial evidence that the clearer a person's vision is, the more likely they are to be motivated toward proactive behavior.

In King's model of career self-management (2004) (a contemporary update of Crites' model of vocational adjustment (1969) or career development), career self-management consists of behaviors aimed at increasing perceived control over one's career. It accounts for the motives behind why people engage in career self-management, the possible career and life outcomes (occupational health and well-being, promotions, fulfillment, career satisfaction, etc.) and the so-called coping strategies employed to overcome career obstacles (called work adjustment mechanisms by Crites).

A second similarity between the concepts of employability and self-regulation with regard to attaining results (and thus employability), is that performance orientation (prove or avoid) and learning orientation are both relevant, because of permanent organization and market changes. Porath and Bateman (2006, p. 185) define self-regulation as "processes that enable an individual to guide his or her goal-directed activities over time and across changing circumstances, including the modulation of thought, affect, and behavior". According to the approach-avoidance framework of Elliot & Trash (2002), 'performance prove' and learning orientations, focusing on the possibility of success, are both positively related to performance. A 'performance avoid' orientation, that is focusing on the possibility of failure, is negatively related to achievement (e.g. Creed, King, Hood, & McKenzie, 2009; Porath & Bateman, 2006; VandeWalle, Brown, Cron, & Slocum, 1999).

A third similarity between the concepts of employability and self-regulation concerns: the deployment of strategies and the removing of obstacles to get to the result (e.g. King, 2004).

Goal setting, effort and planning, feedback-seeking, proactive behavior, emotional control, and social competence are mentioned as SR tactics (e.g. Porath and Bateman ,2006; VandeWalle et al., 1999). Furthermore, Abele and Wiese (2009) distinguish between general SR strategies (from Baltes & Baltes, 1990, selection optimization and compensation) and specific career SR strategies, and demonstrate their relationship with career success.

In relation to the aforementioned, employability and self-regulation also have an important link to coping. When strived for goals are not met, plans have to be adapted and disappointments have to be handled. In the proactive coping theoretical framework of Aspinwall and Taylor, (1997), the concept of proactive coping is an overlap between coping and self-regulation. Proactive coping actually entails the elimination of stressors *before* they have the chance to develop. Proactive coping is conceptualized as five stages: resource accumulation, attention recognition, initial appraisal, preliminary coping and ‘elicit and use feedback’.

Career adaptability, a more proactive variant of career resilience (Bimrose & Hearne, 2012), is defined by Savickas (1997, p. 254) (building on Super and Knasel (1981) as “the readiness to cope with the predictable tasks of preparing for and participating in the work role and with the unpredictable adjustments prompted by changes in work and working conditions” - and also bears resemblance to employability, implying self-regulatory processes.

In the following sections, we will look more closely into employability approaches in some frequently occurring work situations: the unemployment context, the organizational context, and the reorganizational context. Without aiming to be exhaustive, examples of more elaborate employability measurement instruments for those specific contexts will be given.

3. Employability within an unemployment context

The employability focus in an unemployment context is on the qualities and competences that the unemployed individual must have, to regain employment. McArdle et al. (2007) tested Fugate's person-centered psycho-social construct (2004), an approach in which the employability of an individual can be evaluated apart from their employment status. According to Fugate, Kinicki, and Ashforth (2004), employability is highly relevant in an unemployment context. Specifically, they suggest that employable individuals are "(a) less likely to be psychologically harmed by job loss, (b) more likely to engage in greater job search, and (c) more likely to gain high quality re-employment" (McArdle et al., 2007, p no 249). Employability (adaptability, career identity, human, and social capital) was found to be positively related to job search, re-employment (although a less strong relationship), and self-esteem.

Koen, Klehe, and Vianen (2013), tested a positive relationship between employability and job search intensity and finding reemployment in long-term unemployed persons, thereby extending the application of the concept of employability beyond only working persons.

The components of employability (Fugate et al., 2004) *adaptability* and *career identity* were positively related to job search intensity one year later, and the *social and human capital* and *career identity* components were important factors contributing to reemployment success.

Kanfer, Wanberg, and Kantrowitz (2001) demonstrated the relationship of antecedents to job search and employment outcomes as a motivational self-regulatory process. The antecedents were personality, generalized expectancies, self-evaluations, motives, social context, and biographical variables. Two dimensions of personality: extraversion and conscientiousness were rather strongly related to job search. The antecedents were even stronger related to job search as they were to employment outcomes. They found that job search effort and job search intensity

were related to employment success. Differences were also found for job losers, new entrants and employed individuals, for instance job search behavior was more positively related to employment success in job-to-job seekers than in new entrants or job losers.

Although several studies focused on the relationship of job search intensity and re-employment, (e.g. Creed, et al., 2009), one wasn't always found, thus urging future studies to focus on the quality of job search instead. Saks (2005) presents an integrative self-regulatory (process) model of job search predictors, behaviors, and outcomes. In this model, self-regulation - which includes job search self-efficacy, perceived control, goal-setting, and job search behaviors - functions as a mediator between individual, biographical variables, and situational variables, and employment outcomes and employment quality.

But the focus in an unemployment situation should not solely be on job-seeking (a performance orientation). With regard to a learning orientation, job seekers need to expand or broaden their horizon, in the sense that they need to follow some kind of training, education or do unpaid work to get experience in a certain field, or perhaps they can do an internship (or settle for less with a less attractive job, only to stay on top of (labor) market developments, preferably also contributing to broadening of knowledge and experience). (e.g. Ebberwein, Krieschok, Ulven & Prosser, 2004). It should be recognized that the job search process is a learning experience in itself, offering possibilities to improve networking skills, personal presentation skills, and self-knowledge, and discover portfolio gaps, and acquire knowledge about the current job market and one's particular niche of interest.

The emotion regulation or the coping part of unemployment (caused either by job loss or prolonged unemployment) is improvable with interventions. As an example, Caplan, Vinokur, Price and Van Ryn (1989), created a job-seeking training including anticipating setbacks,

developing functional responses and skills to setbacks and positive social reinforcement. They demonstrated higher quality reemployment (earnings, job satisfaction) or higher job seeking motivation from this intervention.

4. Employability within an organizational context

Employability within an organizational context focuses on the qualities and competences that the employed individual must have, to retain employment. In the competence-based approach to employability (Van der Heijde & Van der Heijden, 2006), an elaboration of the resource-based view of the firm, employability is not only a precursor for employee results (e.g. performance, career outcomes), but also for organizational outcomes (e.g. Fugate et al., 2004). Organizations can reach a *human resource advantage* over other firms by selecting and retaining competent workers and investing in them with appropriate HR policies and practices (Boxall, 1999).

Jiang, Lepak, Hu, and Baer (2012), looked into the effects of three dimensions of HR systems—skills-enhancing, motivation-enhancing, and opportunity-enhancing—on organizational outcomes. It appeared that proximal firm outcomes human capital and motivation were important mediating variables between these HR systems and more distant firm outcomes such as voluntary turnover and operational and financial outcomes. Likewise, Crook, Todd, Combs, Woehr, and Ketchen, (2011) found in their meta-analysis of 66 studies, that human capital has a strong relationship with organizational performance, especially when not easily tradable in labor markets and when (non-profit) operational performance measures are used.

In the competence-based approach to employability (Van der Heijde & Van der Heijden, 2006), employability implies a lot of flexibility and broadening alongside expertise development (occupational expertise complemented with more generic competences: anticipation and

optimization, personal flexibility, corporate sense and balance, see page 475-476 for the validated measure). Workers need to find their balance between moving along with organizations in the process of adapting to changing environments, and staying protean (staying in control of career). Employability in this sense entails a continuous monitoring of one's competences compared to certain performance standards of the organizational (changing) environment, coupled with (developmental) actions.

Competences can be regarded as self-directed actions of individuals: the perfect and integrated execution of a whole series of different tasks within a certain (occupational) domain (Mulder, 2001; Onstenk, 1997; Van der Heijde & Van der Heijden, 2006), that are a result of personal motivation, capacities, both function and domain specific and unspecific knowledge and skills, attitudes and personality. Some scientific research contributions have focused on the employability competence level (resulting level); others however have focused on the level of personal attributes (ksa's) as a precursor, leading to employability competences.

Employability and self-regulation, beyond metacognition (about knowledge states and deductive reasoning) entail complex interactions between social, motivational, and behavioral processes (e.g. Fugate et al., 2004; Zimmerman, 1995). Employable self-regulating workers, are also able to handle emotional processes and other obstacles (fatigue, stressors, distractions) (Zimmerman, 1995). It is a good example of why being able to graduate with the highest grades (or having a very high IQ), has less predictive value than estimated on how successful a person is later in his/her career.

5. Employability within a reorganizational context

Contemporary organizations, go through frequent restructuring, delayering and downsizing - aimed at improving their efficiency, productivity and competitiveness (Cascio, 1993; Freeman & Cameron, 1993), thereby relying heavily on the employability of workers. Besides being able to deal with increased feelings of job insecurity (due to involuntary job employee reductions) and being able to cope with emotions, survivors have to work more efficiently and with more flexibility. They have to be more creative and innovative, and perform new tasks for which they have no formal education or practical experience (i.e. Hamel & Prahalad, 1994)

Wittekind, Raeder, and Grote (2010) performed a longitudinal study to investigate predictors of *perceived* employability in a situation of organizational change, stemming from the idea that the cognitive appraisal of the situation (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984) determines the amount of stress experienced. Potential involuntary job loss could lead to lower levels of organizational commitment, performance, job satisfaction, or decreased health and wellbeing (Wittekind et al., 2010). They found that education, support for career and skill development, current level of job-related skills, and willingness to change jobs were significant predictors of perceived employability, which they define (p. 579) and operationalize (p. 572) as “a person’s perception” of his/her chance of finding alternative employment”.

An important part of self-regulation, particularly in reorganization situations, is emotion regulation. An important reorganization failure is the lack of attention for the workers to adapt to the intended organizational changes. A supportive and righteous climate that takes into account the emotions of the employees while adapting to organizational changes, is not seldom overlooked (Kimberley & Härtel, 2007).

According to a study into the HR perception of survivor syndrome in a downsizing firm (Sahdev & Vinnicombe, 1998), emotions such as fear and guilt are common. This study concludes that stress increased and motivation decreased. According to the life-span theory of control, stressful events with regard to career-related goals, also have the potential to contribute to a decline in control strivings, especially in cases of urgency, with regard to developmental deadlines, thereby impairing motivational processes (Poulin & Heckhausen, 2007). As such they have the power to explain negative results from stressful events such as decreases in job performance, etc. Both primary control (control directed at the external world) as well as secondary control strategies (control directed towards the self) are deployed for goal pursuit.

The Fugate and Kinicki (2008) dispositional approach to employability (including a reliable and validated measure, p. 512) has been developed from the perspective of organizational change. “Dispositional employability was defined as a constellation of individual differences that predispose individuals to (pro)active adaptability specific to work and careers.” Fugate and Kinicki (2008) argue that individual dispositions become more important in shaping behaviors and performance in organizations, due to organizational environments becoming more malleable. The dimensions openness to changes at work, work and career proactivity, career motivation, work and career resilience, optimism at work and work identity, all bear witness to elements of proactive self-regulation, such as self-monitoring and self-evaluating, setting goals and desired states for changing, as well as self-regulation tactics in the face of adversity.

Furthermore, Fugate and Kinicki (2008) found their dispositional approach to employability to be positively related to positive emotions related to changes and affective commitment to changes - ultimately seeming promising with regard to control coping with organizational change which entails both actions and cognitive reappraisals. In Fugate, Kinicki,

and Prussia (2008), negative organizational outcomes such as sick time used, intentions to quit, and voluntary turnover were predicted by negative appraisal, emotions and control and escape coping (in that order).

6. Practical implications for career counseling and guidance

To stimulate the contemporary workforce towards greater employability and self-regulation, contemporary career counseling and guidance should focus on the development of career self-directedness (Verbruggen, 2010). Second, contemporary career counseling and guidance in contrast to traditional career counseling, should focus on long-term instead of short-term career decisions. Furthermore, career guidance should be available to workers at each step of their career, and all groups of workers (both organizational career management as well as external career counseling), in contrast to traditional career counseling (f.i. not only school leavers and new entrants but also experienced and older workers)

To stimulate career self-management, addressing career attitudes and career insight (aspirations) and career self-management behaviors (networking, creating visibility) are important (De Vos & Soens, 2008). Career insight, which can be improved during career counseling, has the potential to increase perceived employability. In Vos and Soens (2008), career insight fully mediated protean career attitude and career outcomes (perceived employability and career satisfaction). They also found a positive relationship between protean career attitude and career self-management behaviors.

Likewise, Verbruggen and Sels (2008), found improved career self-directedness in career counseling clients (within a span of at least 6 months), partly and significantly through increasing self-awareness and adaptability in the counseling process. Also the suspected positive

relationship between increased career self-directedness and employer-independent action was found in the form of increased training participation and job mobility.

It seems as though workers with a protean career attitude and who score high on career self-management, profit more from career counseling and guidance than workers that are not as actively and consciously involved in their careers, although this high involvement also might have a negative side effect. Since careers do not evolve in a vacuum, dispositional and environmental factors also play an important role in career goal progress, making workers vulnerable to disappointments. However, Verbruggen and Sels (2010) tested Lent and Brown's social cognitive model of wellbeing in the work domain, and found that clients with higher career goal self-efficacy at the end of counseling, on average, encountered less external barriers, and realized more career goal progress and higher career goal self-efficacy beliefs half a year after the counseling. These factors in turn all contributed to a higher level of career satisfaction.

In contemporary dynamic career and work environments, there is a need for more up-to-date and modern career counseling and guidance theoretical models and practices, wherein individuals are studied within their ever-changing contexts with major roles for personal flexibility and adaptability and lifelong learning (Savickas et al., 2009). Current models reason too much from stable careers. Savickas et al, (2009) propose 'life designing' interventions, which take into account personal life alongside one's working life (see also Ebberwein et al, 2004; King, 2004). It entails a focus shift from test scores and profile interpretations to stories and activities (Savickas et al, 2009). Organizations, no longer able to provide structure to careers, from a career constructionist theoretical point of view, the personal life story (including past, present and future work roles) should fulfill that function now.

7. Chapter Summary

This chapter deals with employability approaches in some frequently occurring work situations: the unemployment context, the organizational context, and the reorganizational context. Furthermore, practical implications for career counseling, and guidance for contemporary careers—wherein employability and career self-management fulfill important roles—are provided.

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Running Head: Employability and self-regulation in contemporary careers

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