



## Predictors for re-employment success in newly unemployed: A prospective cohort study



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### ABSTRACT

The aim of the present study was to examine which personal and situational factors affect reemployment success in persons in their first year of unemployment. In a prospective cohort study with a one-year follow-up, we investigated a sample of 3618 subjects who became unemployed. A survey was sent to all participants, including personal and situational factors, based on Wanberg's model, the Theory of Planned Behavior model and the Valence–Instrumentality–Expectancy model. Our results showed that ten key-factors predicted re-employment success in the first year after becoming unemployed. Knowing these factors, and in particular those which are amenable to change through any intervention program, may help to develop effective intervention strategies for those who facilitate reemployment in order to shorten the duration of unemployment.

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### 1. Introduction

A myriad of factors have been found to be related to re-employment success after becoming unemployed. In 2002 Wanberg et al. (Wanberg, Hough, & Song, 2002) proposed a comprehensive model of the variable groups associated with re-employment success in unemployed individuals. According to this model, a job seeker's re-employment success depends not only on the labor market's need for employees but also on job seekers' individual characteristics such as their job-related knowledge, skills, abilities, motivation, social capital, health status and financial need. A recent literature review (Wanberg, 2012) gives an extensive description of the available literature on the studies of the factors associated with successful re-employment. It concludes that most studies have focused on specific topics relevant to re-employment success. A meta-analysis of Kanfer et al. (Kanfer, Wanberg, & Kantrowitz, 2001) showed that several personality traits (e.g. extroversion, openness to experience, conscientiousness) and other individual variables (self-esteem and job-search self-efficacy) were related to unemployment duration. A few studies examined the relationship between (mental) health and re-employment success and tend to find that lower mental health slightly decelerates re-employment speed (Paul & Moser, 2009; Vinokur & Schul, 2002) or has no effect at all on re-employment success (Ginexi, Howe, & Caplan, 2000; Wanberg, Zhu, & Van Hooft, 2010). Lötters et al. (Lötters et al., 2013) examined the relation between perceived health and unemployment status in a sample of long-term unemployed and found that ill health was a strong predictor for unemployment after 12 months, which confirmed the findings of previous studies by Garcia-Gomez et al. (Garcia-Gomez, Jones, & Rice, 2010; Stewart, 2001).

Only a few researches has broadly focused on delineating the myriad of factors related to re-employment success. The authors of the Wanberg model operationalized most of the variable groups and found that the variables explained only a small percentage of the variance in an array of re-employment success outcomes (Kanfer et al., 2001; Wanberg et al., 2002). They suggested that knowledge of additional variables and interactions of variables, and more adequate ways to measure relevant variables are needed to better explain

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re-employment outcomes. In a study by Van Hooff et al. (Van Hooff, Born, Taris, Van der Flier, & Blonk, 2004) the application of Ajzen's (Ajzen, 1985, 1991) Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) to predict job search intention and behavior was confirmed in a group of unemployed individuals. The job search attitude–intention–behavior relationship was stronger in the unemployed group than in the employed group. They also found that work valence was a significant predictor of job search behavior in the unemployed group, which is consistent with the expectancy–value theory of Vroom (Vroom, 1964) and in accordance with previous research (Feather & O'Brien, 1987; Vinokur, Schul, & Caplan, 1987). This relationship was partially mediated by job search attitude and completely mediated by job search intention. The results of the large number of studies focusing on predictors for re-employment success have added to a better understanding of the job search and re-employment process.

Although several studies have been conducted aiming to find out the predictive validity of several factors on re-employment, implementation of this knowledge into an instrument for daily practice is still a necessary step to be taken. The Dutch Social Security Agency (SSA), who is responsible for social security regulations and provides unemployment benefit and unemployment counseling, asked the authors to develop such an instrument for the assessment and diagnosis of the unemployed individuals who apply for unemployment benefits at the SSA. Such an instrument may help to choose services related to the clients personal characteristics, as not all job seekers will likely benefit to the same extent from the same type of assistance. As offering employment counseling to all individuals who become unemployed is too expensive nowadays, and the government imposed a cost reduction of 50% in 2015, the instrument may also help to select those individuals who need employment counseling because of their low re-employment chances.

In developing such an instrument for the Dutch SSA, the first step was to examine which factors predict re-employment. Against this background, the aim of the present study was to examine which personal and situational factors affect re-employment success in persons in their first year of unemployment.

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Participants and procedures

The study is a prospective cohort study with one-year follow-up among persons claiming unemployment benefit. To be eligible for unemployment benefits in the Netherlands one has to be on the payroll for at least 26 weeks in the 36 weeks before dismissal. Moreover, the dismissal should not be imputed by one's own fault, and the person on unemployment benefit must be available for the labor force. Within the time-period of this study, people could receive unemployment benefits for a minimum term of 3 months and a maximum term of 38 months depending on the number of years worked in paid labor. Individuals that obtain an unemployment benefit are obliged to seek a job or to follow a vocational rehabilitation trajectory.

Participants eligible for the present study were recruited using registry data from the SSA in the North-Holland province of the Netherlands, including cities as Amsterdam, Haarlem, Alkmaar and Den Helder. All subjects who applied for unemployment benefit and were registered by the SSA as unemployed, received an information letter and a survey by postal mail. The questionnaire took 20–30 min to complete and had to be returned in a prepaid envelop within ten days. Participation was voluntary and support by telephone was continuously available during the inclusion period.

Each questionnaire had a serial number that was anonymously linked with the SSA registers (POLIS data) at baseline and during follow-up. Subjects were asked to return the completed survey to the researchers at the university. Completed questionnaires of subjects who were not in the SSA registers during the total follow-up period because of maximum duration of the benefit was less than 12 months, and subjects who were not applicable to return-to-work because of pregnancy, sickness or death, and reaching retirement age during follow-up were excluded. Also subjects charged for fraud and those who did not follow the regulation's procedural rules for pension claims were excluded. Finally, completed surveys were only included if they were returned within one month after the application for unemployment benefits.

## 3. Measures

### 3.1. Independent variables

First, we operationalized the variable groups of the Wanberg model (Kanfer et al., 2001; Wanberg et al., 2002) by using constructs of the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB: Ajzen, 1985, 1991) and the Valence–Instrumentality–Expectancy Model (VIE: Vroom, 1964) (see Table 1). Next, a questionnaire was developed and tested in a cross-sectional pilot study (published in Dutch report). Factors with 2 or 3 items and with minimal validity (Cronbach's alpha > 0.50) were included in the final questionnaire for the present study (see Table 1). To measure perceived health status and psychosomatic complaints we included the Dutch perceived health questionnaire (in Dutch: Vragenlijst Onderzoek Ervaren Gezondheid) (Dirken, 1969, Kompier & Marcelissen, 1990); which consists of 13 items. Work-ability was measured with the single-item of the Work Ability Index (Tuomi, Ilmarinen, Jahkola, Katajarinne, & Tulkki, 1998), which compares current work ability to life time best on a 1 to 10 scale. This single-item question on work ability has shown to have a strong association with the complete Work Ability Index in employees on sickness absence (Ahlstrom, Grimby-Ekman, Hagberg, & Dellve, 2010; Kujala et al., 2006), and is nowadays often used in research (De Vries, Reneman, Groothoff, Geertzen, & Brouwer, 2013; Koolhaas, Van der Klink, De Boer, Groothoff, & Brouwer, 2014; Van den Berg, Elders, De Zwart, & Burdorf, 2009). We measured general work ability, physical and mental work ability separately. We used four or five answer options:

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