



Integrating different notions of employability in a dynamic chain: The relationship between job transitions, movement capital and perceived employability



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ABSTRACT

This study connects different notions of employability with the ultimate aim to arrive at integration of a research field that has been criticized for being fragmented and fuzzy. We define employability as “an individual's chance of a job in the internal and/or external labor market”. Employability research assesses employability differently, looking at the realization of this chance (i.e., job transitions), personal strengths that increase this chance (i.e., movement capital) and appraisals of this chance (i.e., perceived employability). We hypothesize and establish in a two-wave sample of 643 Belgian (Dutch-speaking) employees that these different notions of employability form a dynamic chain, so that job transitions promote movement capital, which then affects perceived employability and ultimately feeds back to job transitions. Furthermore, we found that the internal labor market versus the external labor market are important foci in employability research since internal and external job transitions were found to relate differently to the other notions of employability.

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Employability research has a fairly long tradition (Feintuch, 1955). Employability was originally conceived as important for school leavers and the unemployed, and to make the labor market more inclusive for vulnerable groups. Recently, employability has attracted renewed interest as a way to secure employment against the background of changes in the pattern of individual careers and in the labor market: careers are becoming increasingly fragmented and employer-independent (Arthur & Rousseau, 1996; Hall, 2002) and employees need to comply with restructurings (Van der Heijde & Van der Heijden, 2006), often implying job changes in the internal or external labor market. This has resulted in a proliferation of employability studies which attest to the importance of employability for those already employed (Thijssen, Van der Heijden, & Rocco, 2008) and in both the internal and the external labor market (Rothwell & Arnold, 2007).

The common feature in these studies is that employability is framed in terms of “an individual's chance of a job in the internal and/or external labour market” (Forrier & Sels, 2003, p. 106). However, there is considerable debate as to what this “chance” constitutes. Some authors look at mobility to assess the realization of this chance (i.e., job transitions; e.g., Mancinella, Mazzanti, Piva, & Ponti, 2010; Raemdonck, Tillemans, de Grip, Valcke, & Segers, 2012), others focus on personal strengths in the form of knowledge, skills and attitudes that influence this chance (i.e., movement capital; e.g., Fugate, Kinicki & Ashforth, 2004; Koen, Klehe, & Van Vianen, 2013; Van der Heijde & Van der Heijden, 2006), and still others use individuals' appraisals of this chance (i.e., perceived employability; e.g., Berntson, Sverke, & Marklund, 2006; De Cuyper, Bernhard-Oettel, Berntson, De Witte, & Alarco, 2008; Wittekind, Raeder, &

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Grote, 2010). The result of these different notions is that employability has been criticized for being fuzzy and a catch-all concept (Brown, Hesketh, & Williams, 2003; Forrier & Sels, 2003; Gazier, 1998; McQuaid & Lindsay, 2005), and that employability research is a scattered field of stand-alone studies.

In response to the call for more integrated studies (Forrier & Sels, 2003; Gazier, 1998; Thijssen et al., 2008), this study aims to connect the different notions of employability along the process model advanced by Forrier and colleagues (Forrier & Sels, 2003; Forrier, Sels, & Stynen, 2009): job transitions enlarge movement capital (Chudikowski, 2012), movement capital enhances perceived employability (Eby, Butts, & Lockwood, 2003; Wittekind et al., 2010) and perceived employability encourages further job transitions (Jiang, Liu, McKay, Lee, & Mitchell, 2012), so that ultimately a dynamic chain is established. We study this chain in a two-wave sample of 643 Belgian (Dutch-speaking) employees.

1. Notions of employability

1.1. Job transitions

A first group of authors assesses employability in terms of job transitions (Forrier & Sels, 2003). The underlying idea is that job transitions attest to the individual's chances in the labor market. Job transitions entail “any change in employment status and any major change in job content” (Nicholson, 1984, p. 173). These changes can be within the same organization (internal job transition) or across organizations (external job transitions). Indicators are, for example, internal and external job changes (de Feyter, Smulders, & de Vroome, 2001); horizontal and vertical job transitions (Raemdonck et al., 2012), or the ratio between job and labor market tenure (de Grip, van Loo, & Sanders, 2004).

1.2. Movement capital

A second group of authors has focused on employability as “a host of person-centered constructs” (Fugate, Kinicki, & Ashforth, 2004, p. 14). The assumption here is that personal strengths increase an individual's chance in the labor market because they help to deal effectively with changes in the labor market (Clarke, 2008; Fugate et al., 2004). Forrier et al. (2009) have placed the different strengths under the heading of movement capital, namely the aggregate of “individual skills, knowledge, competencies and attitudes influencing an individual's career mobility” (p. 742) along four dimensions: human capital, social capital, self-awareness and adaptability. This typology has much appeal. First, it encompasses previous work on person-centered interpretations of employability: it is inspired on the seminal work by Fugate et al. (2004), it embraces other typologies (e.g., Akkermans, Brenninkmeijer, Huibers, & Blonk, 2013; Van der Heijde & Van der Heijden, 2006), and these four dimensions have also been highlighted in earlier studies (e.g., Koen, Klehe, & Van Vianen, 2013; McArdle, Waters, Briscoe, & Hall, 2007). Second, it aligns with career competencies identified in the literature on boundaryless careers (DeFillippi & Arthur, 1994) and the protean career (Briscoe & Hall, 2006).

The first dimension, human capital, refers to “an individual's ability to meet the performance expectations of a given occupation” (Fugate et al., 2004, p. 25). Human capital is reflected in other person-centered typologies as occupational expertise (Van der Heijde & Van der Heijden, 2006), and in knowing-how competencies from the career literature (DeFillippi & Arthur, 1994).

The second dimension is social capital which reflects the value of social networks in shaping careers. Social capital occupies a central position also in other person-centered typologies, for example in the form of communicative career competencies (Akkermans et al., 2013) or networking (Kuijpers, Schyns, & Scheerens, 2006), and it aligns with the idea of knowing-whom competencies from the career literature (DeFillippi & Arthur, 1994).

The third dimension is self-awareness. Self-awareness concerns a reflection about the past and present careers in view of providing direction in future career opportunities (Fugate et al., 2004). It implies that individuals are cognizant of their strengths and weaknesses and of goals and values they want to pursue. Self-awareness helps individuals to develop towards a desired future career. Self-awareness is captured in other person-centered typologies as career identity (Fugate et al., 2004) or reflective career competencies (Akkermans et al., 2013). It is furthermore central in the career literature: DeFillippi and Arthur (1994) in this respect refer to knowing-why competencies, and Briscoe and Hall (2006; see also Hall, 2004) advance self-awareness as a critical meta-competency to become protean.

Finally, the fourth dimension concerns adaptability, which refers to the combination of willingness and ability “to change behaviours, feelings and thoughts in responses to environmental demands” (McArdle et al., 2007, p. 248): it is the dynamic component with a strong focus on individual progress. Willingness concerns the individuals' openness towards changes, for example in line with the idea of employability orientation coined by Van Dam (2004; Nauta, Van Vianen, Van der Heijden, Van Dam, & Willemssen, 2009). Ability refers to more generic competences, namely the idea that workers are capable of adapting to all kinds of changes, from relatively modest (e.g., changes in the content of work) to more profound changes (e.g., organizational restructuring or downsizing). An example concerns the notion of personal flexibility, as defined by Van der Heijde and Van der Heijden (2006). Adaptability has been highlighted as another meta-competency to become protean (Briscoe & Hall, 2006; Hall, 2004).

1.3. Perceived employability

A third group of authors sees employability in terms of the individual's perception of available employment opportunities. This has roots in the work on perceived ease of movement (March & Simon, 1958) and is more recently captured under the heading of employability radius (Thijssen et al., 2008) or perceived employability (Berntson, Näswall, & Sverke, 2008; De Cuyper & De Witte, 2011;

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