
The concept employability: a complex mosaic

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Abstract: Since lifetime employment within the same organisation is no longer a prerogative for all, job security has to be safeguarded differently. In this respect, 'lifetime employability' instead of 'lifetime employment' is often put forward as the new protection in the labour market. Although employability became a buzzword in organisational literature, no clear consensus about its meaning and measurement can be found. In this paper, we bring some clarification to the debate about employability. We develop a conceptual model of the 'employability process'. This conceptual model offers a framework for future empirical research on employability. It can help to identify the main factors that may influence labour market transitions for individuals. In addition, it may clarify the role government and employers can play in shaping these career moves.

Keywords: Employability; movement capital; labour market transitions; employability enhancement.

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1 Introduction

Until recently, climbing the hierarchical ladder within the same organisation was the most common and favoured way of making a career. During the last decades, however, lifetime employment within the same organisation came under pressure. Changing employers and professions is nowadays no longer considered a rarity.

The conclusion that lifetime employment within the same organisation is no longer a prerogative for all, inspires the search for new career concepts. Protean careers [1], post-modern nomads [2] and boundaryless careers [3] are just a few of the expressions indicating the less predictable walk on the career path. While some may consider this to be the release of having one's hands tied to one employer, others are more concerned about the related loss of job security. Yet, this evolution towards less job security should be no reason for despair according to the former. Since lifetime employment within the same organisation can no longer be guaranteed, job security has to be safeguarded differently. In this respect, 'lifetime employability' instead of 'lifetime employment' is put forward as the new protection in the labour market [4,5]. A successful career is believed to be assured by having and obtaining the appropriate capacities for being continuously employable in the internal and external labour market during one's working life.

However, firm statements about employability as a new mechanism for labour market protection are hard to make because of the vagueness of the concept. It is therefore necessary to enlarge our understanding of the employability concept. Although employability became a buzzword in organisational literature, no clear consensus about its specific meaning can be found. Since no clear conceptual model of employability exists, there are as many measurements as researchers of the topic. In this paper, we bring some clarification within the debate about employability. We develop a conceptual model of the 'employability process'. This conceptual model offers a framework for future empirical research on employability. It can help to identify the main factors that may influence labour market transitions of individuals. In addition, it may clarify the role government and the social partners can play in shaping these career moves.

In the first part of this paper, we debate the existing literature and research on employability. In the second part, we explain our conceptual model. In the final conclusion, we highlight the added value of the model.

2 An old term in a new guise? A brief history

Although the term employability has been in the spotlight since the 1990s, it is not exactly new [6–8]. The first publications date from the 1950s [9]. In the publications from the 1950s and 1960s, employability served a primarily economic purpose, that of achieving full employment. In those times of economic prosperity and a tight labour market, this was closely connected to encouraging the underprivileged unemployed to take part in the labour process. The main explanatory variables considered were factors relating to attitude, such as the attitude towards work and self-image. Forms of government intervention aimed at stimulating entry into the labour market were the most important measures promoting employability that were suggested. In the early 1970s the economic situation changed. The emphases in the literature on employability were placed

elsewhere. The main aim of employability and the policy of promoting it, was still to achieve full employment, but as a result of increasing unemployment attention shifted from factors relating to attitude towards aspects of knowledge and skills [9]. It became an economic necessity for employees to be as 'employable' as possible.

In the 1980s, attention shifted to the company level. The literature on organisations was full of publications focusing on the way in which companies could cope with the constant changes with which they were confronted. The term employability also had a place in this debate. It was considered a means of achieving flexibility within organisations. From this point of view, employability meant the functional flexibility of staff. Employability was no longer approached as a labour market instrument, but rather as an HR instrument to optimise the deployment of staff within companies.

Since the 1990s, attention has shifted back to employability as a labour market instrument. However, the focuses of attention have altered compared with the 1960s and 1970s. Employability is no longer considered important only for those who are deprived and unemployed, but for the entire active population. It is now mainly considered an alternative to job security. It is not only important to stimulate entry into the labour market, but also to ensure career possibilities within and beyond the borders of organisations. The literature on employability now focuses primarily on the individual's ability to maintain a job in the internal or external labour market. The individual, and not government bodies or the employer, is brought forward as the main actor. Employability is related to the 'new psychological contract' between employers and employees [10]. Within this 'new' psychological contract, employees are expected to take responsibility for their own career. In return, the employee can expect the employer to offer the necessary support and facilities to expand his or her employability.

This brief history sets out the changes in emphasis in a more sequential fashion than was actually the case. On the one hand, during the 1950s there were already authors who separated the term from underprivileged groups in the labour market. March & Simon [11] for instance, introduced the term individual employability in their model of voluntary turnover. On the other hand, recently sufficient literature on employability focuses purely on bringing the unemployed into the labour market [e.g. 12–15].

This brief history illustrates that the term employability can serve a variety of purposes. Thijssen [8] distinguishes between three objectives. Employability is an indicator of the chance of work. In this sense, work can have three distinct meanings:

- Work, in the sense of employment, as seen from the point of view of society and above all of the government. In this case, employability is an indicator of the chance of full employment.
- Work, in the sense of the employment of employees, seen from the point of view of an organisation. For an employer, employability is an indicator of the possibility of matching labour supply and demand.
- Work, in the sense of an (attractive) job, seen from the point of view of the individual. For an individual, employability is an indicator of the chance of a job or a career.

The various objectives are of course interconnected. For instance, full employment is only possible if each member of the active population has the chance of a job. In recent literature and research, employability is mainly examined at the individual level.

However, this does not necessarily mean that full employment is not an issue anymore or that other players are lost from sight. Employability has become a broad term given a very wide interpretation.

3 Current differences in meaning and measurement

We give an overview of the possible differences in the definition and the measurement of employability in recent research.

Theoretical definition. The employability of individuals may apply to the internal labour market within the organisation, *internal employability* [16–20], to the external labour market, *external employability* [5] or to both [21–25].

Dimensions and indicators. Even though certain definitions have adopted the same focus, they often distinguish different dimensions.

- 1 *Individual characteristics:* one group of research measures employability on the basis of a number of characteristics of individuals. Mostly, their *ability* to find and keep a job is examined [6,17,19,20,23]. In addition to the ability, the attitudes or *willingness* of people to find or keep a job is sometimes also included as a dimension of employability [6,19,25,26].
- 2 *Context:* some authors do not solely focus on the individual but involve other parties in their research. Boom and Metselaar [16], for instance, attempt to include the employer's demand for labour in their study of internal employability. They define the employer's demand for mobility as the possibilities the employee observes to undertake various tasks or move to different positions in the organisation in the coming year. Boom and Metselaar consider the absence of conditions and possibilities with the employer as the main limiting factor in career development.
- 3 *Effect:* another group of research is measuring employability by its effects. Hillage and Pollard [24], for instance, look at somebody's labour market position in order to assess his or her employability. They do not only consider whether or not a person has a job, but they also look at the quality of that job, considering factors such as its link with the degree, possibilities for growth, etc.
- 4 *Activities:* a last group of research focuses on the employability-enhancing activities [25,27]. They study the extent to which individuals take part in activities such as training, task enrichment etc. Van Dam [25] develops the concept 'employability orientation'. This term refers to the attitude and behaviour of employees towards enhancing their employability.

Measurement. Some studies integrate the scores for the various indicators to form a single employability index [6,16,18]. Others consider different variables or factors [17,19,23–25,27].

The above illustration shows that the dimensions and indicators of employability can differ sharply. This choice is not connected to whether or not the research is related to internal employability or external employability or both. Moreover, there is no unanimity concerning the status of the different variables. Aspects that are considered by one group to constitute part of the definition and the measurement of employability may be considered by another group more as antecedents or effects of employability. For

instance, Boom and Metselaar [16] consider the willingness to display mobility and to follow training courses as the two most important determinants of employability. De Grip *et al.* [6] treat these two variables not as possible antecedents of employability but rather as actual indicators to measure the employability variable. Biographical characteristics are also examined as possible antecedents of employability on the one hand [19] and included in the measurement of the variable ‘employability’ on the other hand [6]. As a result of this variety of definitions and measurements, the debate on employability lacks clarity.

3.1 *In search for clarity*

By categorising existing definitions, Thijssen [8] tries to bring some clarity back into the debate. Thijssen observes a stratification in the definitions and produces a classification accordingly: a core definition, a broader definition and a comprehensive definition.

- In the *core definition*, employability is described as the personal aptitude to carry out work. The focus is on the actual employability of people. Employability is ‘the individual ability to fulfil a variety of functions in a given labour market’. Groot and Maassen van den Brink [17], for instance, define employability as “The number of tasks a worker can be assigned to or the amount of assistance needed in the job”. Another example of this core definition is provided by Feyter *et al.* [27] who define employability as “the ability of employees to carry out various tasks and functions properly”.
- The *broader definition* covers not only the actual employability but also the individual capacities to enhance and use the given employability. In addition to ability, the willingness to use and enhance employability is added. Employability is described as ‘all individual factors that influence the future positioning in a given segment of the labour market’. The definition of employability provided by Peck and Theodore [28] provides a clear illustration of this broader definition: “the collection of worker characteristics, including attitudes towards work, expectations regarding employment and wages, and behaviours both in the labour market and on the job, that are increasingly seen as determinants of employment chances”.
- Thijssen’s *comprehensive definition* includes in addition context-related factors that promote or inhibit the effective use of employability. This firstly concerns context-related factors which help increase employability, such as training facilities provided by employers. Secondly, it concerns factors that contribute towards determining whether individuals can actually use their employability in the labour market, such as the economic labour market situation or discrimination of certain groups in the labour market. Thijssen’s comprehensive definition describes employability as ‘all the individual and context-related factors that will influence the future labour market position in a given labour market’.

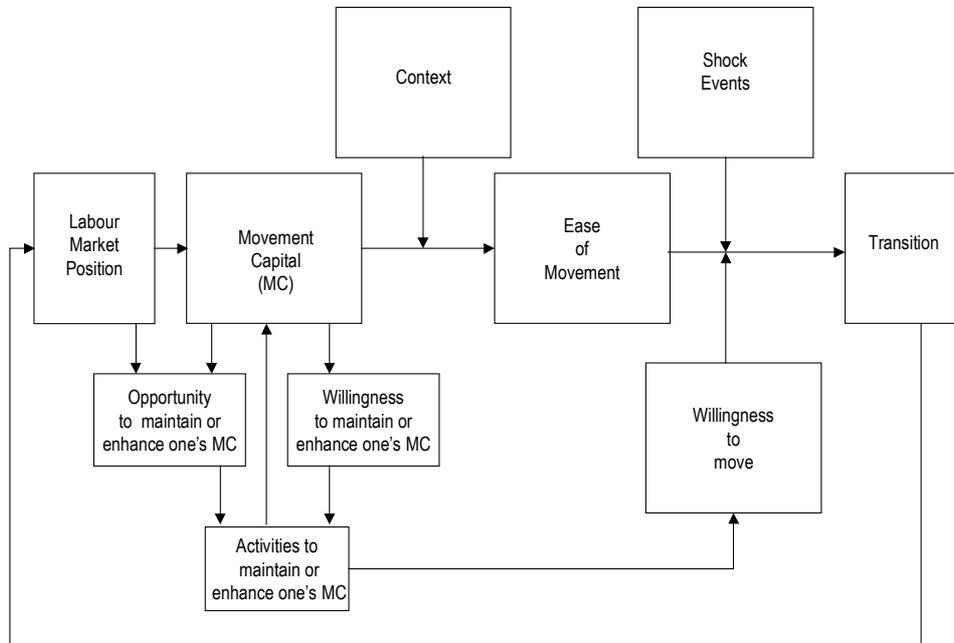
We follow Thijssen’s reasoning that context-related factors play an important role in determining an individual’s employability. His classification of definitions illustrates the differences in scope of employability research. However, we consider Thijssen’s classification not so much as a categorisation of definitions but rather as a list of possible influencing factors of employability. We prefer defining employability more strictly as *an individual’s chance of a job in the internal and/or external labour market*. On the one

hand, the chance of a job depends on an individual's ability and willingness. On the other hand, the chance of a job can only be estimated when context factors are taken into account. In this sense, employability is not purely an individual characteristic that can solely be defined by an individual's ability and willingness. An example may help illustrate this. A pilot has a diploma, a great deal of knowledge and many skills. Moreover, he or she may be very willing to get a job or to keep working. If we look exclusively at the individual ability and willingness, this pilot would be very 'employable'. However, owing to the bankruptcy of Sabena, the demand for pilots in Belgium has fallen very sharply. So a very capable pilot may only have limited employability in Belgium. Employability is not a static characteristic of individuals but takes on a time- and place-related character that depends on the personal and labour market context. Someone who may be 'difficult to place' here and now may well be highly 'employable' at a different time or in a different place, as a result of changes in personal characteristics or in the number or requirements of the available jobs [21].

Below we develop a model that maps out the process within which the chances of a job are created and realised. The 'employability' variable is not included. As employability is not a static characteristic of persons, but is rather time and place-related, it is difficult to measure directly. Employability is a combination of various components and is constantly subject to change. We believe it is more interesting to gain an insight into this process rather than to try to measure and put a figure on an individual's employability. We are interested in the employability process, i.e. the process that influences an individual's chances of a job and steps in the internal and external labour market.

4 The employability process: a conceptual model

Figure 1 illustrates the employability process. We do not consider the model to be a strictly causal model in which each 'input' always produces the same 'output'. The employability process model maps out which factors affect an individual's chance of a job in the internal and external labour market and how these factors can interact. Below, we discuss each component and its relation to the other components in the model separately. We also elaborate on the extent to which the components are studied in existing employability research. Finally, we look at how the components could be measured in future research.

Figure 1 The employability process model

4.1 *The labour market position*

Meaning

To get an idea of somebody's chances in the labour market, it is useful to look at the current labour market position. We indicate the current labour market position as the starting point in our model. This labour market position can take a whole range of forms, including employed, unemployed, student, inactive etc. The model does not focus solely on specific target groups such as employees or underprivileged unemployed.

It is important to be familiar with the current labour market position for various reasons.

- 1 The current labour market position gives an idea of somebody's current opportunities in the labour market (cf. below).
- 2 The current labour market position can be used as a reference point for the assessment of further transitions in the labour market. Does the transition improve the situation, worsen the situation or maintain a *status quo*?
- 3 The current labour market position can influence future chances in the labour market.

For instance, people who have been unemployed for a long time may lose certain knowledge and skills, which may further lessen their chances of employment. Students

get educated to enlarge their chances in the labour market. Employees carrying out the same job for years may lessen their chances of improving their labour market status. The current labour market position may therefore influence somebody's *movement capital*.

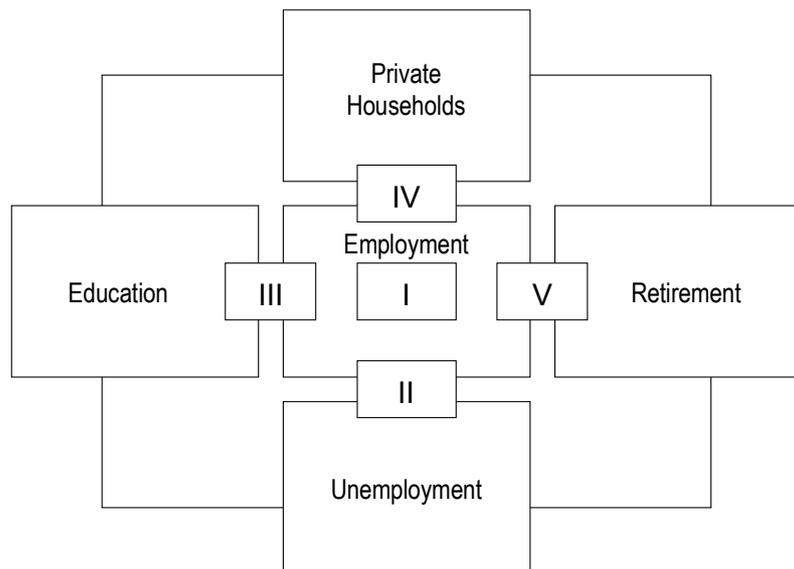
Employability research

A considerable amount of employability research studies the employability of specific groups such as unemployed [12,29–31], students [24,32,33] or employees [17,18]. Regularly more specific characteristics of the labour market position are included in the research, such as, for instance, the duration of unemployment or indicators such as the kind of employment contract, the wage, the hierarchical position, tenure etc.

Measurement

To map out the different labour market positions, the model of the ‘transitional labour market’, illustrated in Figure 2 may be of use [34]. As existing employability research indicates, additional indicators could be useful to differentiate between individuals with the same labour market position. We think about the duration of unemployment, the type of contract (e.g. temporary versus permanent), the wage, the hierarchical position etc.

Figure 2 The transitional labour market



Source: Schmid [34]

4.2 *Movement Capital*

Meaning

We define *movement capital* as the individual characteristics and competencies that influence the chances of mobility in the labour market. We concur with Trevor who describes movement capital as “attributes enhancing an individual’s mobility” [35]. DeFillippi and Arthur [3] and Inkson and Arthur [36] use the term ‘career capital’. We distinguish between two different dimensions of movement capital [37]:

- 1 The first is *ability* or *knowing how*, that is an individual’s skills, knowledge and expertise [3]. Insight in the labour market is an important component of this – i.e. knowledge of the possibilities for transition, of available jobs and the channels leading to jobs, of mechanisms that promote transition, etc. An individual’s ‘social capital’ is crucially important for the development of this sort of insight in the labour market. DeFillippi and Arthur therefore also attach great importance to *knowing whom*.
- 2 In addition, the literature on employability also stresses that motivational characteristics can influence an individual’s chances in the internal and the external labour market. A second dimension of movement capital consists of an individual’s preferences or *career expectations*. DeFillippi and Arthur speak here of *knowing why*. They are referring mainly to the motivation that people confer upon their careers. This motivation determines the direction which people give to their careers.

Employability research

Below, we elaborate on the extent to which (1) ability and (2) career expectations are included in existing employability research.

4.2.1 *Ability*

Although a large amount of research considers an individual’s ability as a central component of employability, very little research attempts to measure someone’s ability directly. The competencies that determine a person’s movement capital are difficult to identify and to measure precisely [38]. This is why other indicators are usually used to assess an individual’s ability. We distinguish the following indicators: signals, technical and behavioural capabilities and labour market behaviour.

- 1 *Signals*: ‘Signalling theories’ assume that an individual’s abilities are not directly known but can only be assessed using ‘signals’. These signals are individual characteristics or activities that provide information about the capabilities of an individual [39]. The career history, the training history and some other biographical characteristics are the main ‘signals’ of ability used in employability research.

- *Career history.* Characteristics of career history that are covered in employability research include, among others, the average period spent in each job [18], the number of years spent with a company [25] or the number of years spent in the present job [6]. These details of years' service provide an indication of the work experience an individual has built up. However, there is no unanimity about the direction in which the career history can influence future employability. Individuals' past careers define their degree of specialisation and diversity. It is often assumed that those who stay too long in the same job reduce their future career opportunities because they become too specialised. For instance, Rosenbaum [38] assumes that faster career moves act as a signal of a person's capacities. However, other authors emphasise that it takes some time in a position to build up the necessary expertise for the job. In this respect, Dewhirst [40] supposes that each job has an optimum tenure. Most employability research, however, assumes simply that tenure leads to a concentration of experience and, therefore, has a negative impact on employability. However, there is considerable doubt as to whether this is always the case. The relationship between tenure and ability is difficult to establish clearly.
 - *Training history.* In addition to career history, training history can also be a signal of an individual's capabilities [38]. Training history provides a picture of what possible activities persons have undertaken in the past to maintain or enhance their movement capital [41]. The most important training characteristics looked at in employability research are the educational level [6,19,27] and the company training followed [6,27]. In most cases, only the diploma level and the duration of company training are examined. It is simply assumed here that longer training has a more favourable effect on the movement capital. However, in addition to the length of the training, the content of the training followed can also have an impact on the movement capital. De Feyter *et al.* [27] make a difference between general training and job-oriented training.
 - *Other biographical characteristics.* Employers can select or rule out people on the basis of individual or group characteristics. These can be referred to as 'stereotype signals' of a person's ability. These signals influence employers' decisions even though they are sometimes based on inaccurate information. This partly explains the unfavourable labour market position of certain groups such as women and minorities. In the Anglo-Saxon literature in particular, a great deal of attention is paid to the employability of so-called 'underprivileged' groups. Examples of 'underprivileged' groups found in the literature on employability include unmarried mothers [14], young people [15,31], elderly people [42], disabled people [43–45], women [46] and ethnic minorities [47,48]. Much of this literature focuses on formulating policy recommendations to strengthen the labour market position of these groups. However, characteristics such as age, sex and family situation are often included in other employability research as control variables.
- 2 *Behavioural capabilities:* the above 'signals' are mainly used as indicators of a person's technical and job-related capabilities. Regularly, other variables measuring

a person's behavioural capabilities are added. Hoyt refers to these capabilities as 'transferable skills' [49]. Examples of behavioural capabilities that are included in employability research include independence, growth need [19], openness to experiences [25], getting along with co-workers [50] and flexibility [51]. 'Knowing whom' may also be considered a behavioural capability [3]. Mostly, these behavioural capabilities are measured by means of individuals' perceptions.

- 3 *Self-efficacy*: some research studies both technical and behavioural capabilities by means of an individual's perception. This refers to the concept self-efficacy, i.e. the individuals' belief in their possibilities of successfully carrying out certain tasks or displaying certain behaviour. In the context of employability, 'career self-efficacy' [50] or 'work self-efficacy' [19] are studied.

Besides the individual's perception, Van der Heijden [18,52] also includes the perception of the immediate supervisor in her measurement. She has developed five dimensions and scales to measure somebody's 'professional expertise'. These dimensions measure both technical capabilities (e.g. the knowledge dimension) as well as behavioural capabilities (e.g. growth and flexibility). The first dimension, the knowledge dimension, gauges the extent to which a person has the necessary knowledge in the specialised area. The second dimension, the meta-cognitive knowledge dimension, measures self-insight or self-consciousness. The skills dimension consists of the skills individuals possess to carry out their professional duties. The fourth dimension, 'acquisition of social recognition' measures the individual's social skills. Finally, the fifth dimension, 'growth and flexibility', measures the extent to which an individual is able to acquire more than one area of expertise. She measured the level of professional expertise using two questionnaires. The first questionnaire measured the self-ratings of professional expertise and had to be filled in by the individual employee. The second questionnaire contained the same items but was filled in by the immediate supervisor. Finally, she used the self-ratings scales of knowledge and meta-cognitive knowledge, arguing that these are the most difficult person-bound factors for other people to assess validly. For the other dimensions, the assessments made by the supervisor were used. Consequently, her measure of 'professional expertise' may be more accurate than the more subjective self-efficacy measures. Nonetheless, the relationship between the supervisor and the employee may influence the score. It could be interesting to account for the degree of discrepancy between the meaning of the employee and the supervisor in the measurement.

- 4 *Labour market behaviour*: labour market behaviour is only rarely included as a variable in research into employability. De Grip *et al.* [6] look into the active search for a new job. Boom & Metselaar [16] measure the insight into the internal and external labour market by questioning whether people know for which vacancies they come into consideration with their current or with other employers respectively. The social network or social capital is rarely or not taken into account in research into employability.

4.2.2 Career expectations

Although much employability research includes motivational variables in their studies, very little research takes career expectations into account. Most research only looks at the willingness to participate in employability-enhancing activities or at the willingness to move jobs [53]. Van Dam [25] considers Schein's career anchors [54] as mediating variables between 'openness to experience' and 'employability orientation'. Other research takes 'willingness to be geographically mobile' into account. This also refers to one of Schein's career anchors, namely Geographic stability.

Measurement

Although the movement capital can be considered as a central component in the employability process, it is one of the most difficult to measure thoroughly. We think it is useful to include both technical and behavioural capabilities as indicators of ability. Some competency-models also distinguish between technical capabilities, behavioural capabilities and career expectations to map out a person's competencies [55]. Schein's career anchors have already proven to be good indicators of career expectations. It is harder to find some good indicators to measure 'ability'. Using 'signals' of ability can be questionable since the relationship between these signals and future labour market possibilities is often debatable. Therefore, we think it is first and foremost important that additional research is conducted to identify a good set of possible indicators of 'ability'.

4.3 Ease of movement

Meaning and measurement

Movement capital may influence the available alternatives in the internal and external labour market, or the ease of movement. The term ease of movements refers to the concept of 'perceived ease of movement' as defined by March and Simon [11]. March and Simon consider it to be the individual perception of the available alternatives in the internal and/or external labour market. This perception can be as much based on just a sense as on a concrete job offer.

Employability research

'Ease of movement' is a variable that is often studied in research about voluntary turnover. In employability research it is less taken into account. Van der Velde and van den Berg [19] include the 'career possibilities' variable in their research. This variable measures the employee's perception of the career opportunities within the organisation. Van der Heijden measures 'employability' as the individual's perception of their chance of moving to a higher or equal position within five years [52].

4.4 Context

Meaning

The ease of movement is limited by external or contextual factors. March & Simon [11] refer here, among other things, to characteristics of the external labour market, such as the 'availability of jobs' and the 'organisations visible'. They indicate that the context has a significant impact on the available alternatives. Besides the availability of jobs, reference can also be made to selection mechanisms in the labour market. Companies can select or rule out people on the basis of individual or group characteristics. With a given movement capital in a given temporal and spatial context, slightly more or slightly fewer movement alternatives are available (e.g. statistical discrimination and other forms of discrimination) [56].

Employability research

Thijssen [8] points out that the literature on employability often recognises that contextual conditions may be of significance but that these factors are considered in relatively little empirical research. When calculating their employability score, Boom and Metselaar [16] include the 'employer's demand'. However, they measure this demand solely on the basis of the employee's perception. De Grip *et al.* [6] develop an employability index per sector. Here they confront the employability of the employees with employability requirements in the sector. The employability requirements in the sector are deduced from the technological, economic, demographic and organisational developments within the sector. Studies that focus on transitions between unemployment and employment as an indicator of employability often also introduce some 'structural' factors in their analyses [12,29].

Measurement

Economic situation or number of jobs available. A possible indicator of the economic situation in the external labour market could be the level of unemployment. The available jobs in the internal labour market are more difficult to measure on the basis of one indicator. Research into vacancy chains shows which structural organisation characteristics can influence career opportunities within an organisation [57,58]. A distinction is usually made between four factors:

- 1 the growth rate of the organisation
- 2 the number of jobs at the various levels of the hierarchy
- 3 the average length of service at the various levels of the hierarchy
- 4 the ratio between internal and external recruitment.

Selection patterns. It is not easy to map out selection patterns using indicators. Most research identifies existing segments in the labour market. The labour market segment to which persons belong influences their further career chances. Glebbeek [56] distinguishes between a number of characteristics in respect of which these segments differ from one another. They differ to the extent that employment relationships are long-term, people change employers while remaining in the same profession, people change jobs within

companies, age-related salary structures are applied and mobility is used to improve position. One possible segmentation typology is that of Stinchcombe [59]. He distinguishes between seven business sectors that differ on the basis of the above characteristics: traditional primary industry, 'classical' capitalist industry, competitive industries with skilled workers, large-scale engineering-based industries with skilled workers and bureaucratic administration, small competitive trades and services, professional services and finally bureaucratic services. Glebbeek develops a segmentation plan based on professional groups rather than sectors [56].

4.5 Transition

Meaning

Labour market positions influence future job chances. The model can help explain all possible transitions between labour market positions (cf. Figure 2: the transitional labour market). The concepts of 'labour market position', 'movement capital', 'ease of movement' and 'transition' form one dynamic chain. After all, a transition means a new labour market position and the entire chain can be followed through again.

Employability research

Some research measures employability by looking at labour market transitions. However, there is no unanimity concerning which labour market transitions can be used as indicators of employability.

Work. A first group of research considers every transition to or between jobs as an indication of employability. A definition of careers that links up with this is careers as 'lifelong sequences of jobs' [60]. Under this interpretation, everyone who is in a position to find or keep work shows proof of employability. The quality of the job is not taken into account. Even those who are 'demoted' or have reached a career plateau are considered employable as long as they have a job.

Research into the impact of activities such as 'training' on labour market transitions often only looks at the impact on mobility between jobs [61]. This research does not examine the nature or content of the job. Also, research that considers the transition from unemployment to employment to be an indicator of employability is in line with this interpretation of employability [14].

Decent work. A second group of research takes the quality of the job into account. Someone who is employable, is not only able to find a job, but in addition this job is 'fulfilling' [24] or 'decent' [62]. The 'job' is assessed on the basis of a number of criteria. The following characteristics of the labour market position are examined:

- the status: employed, unemployed, student etc.
- as regards the employed, a number of formal characteristics are usually examined such as, among others, the salary, the level of position, the type of contract, the possibilities for promotion.

These criteria are usually derived from traditional career models in which 'more', such as a higher salary or a higher position, also means 'better'. Van der Heijden, for instance, considers 'employability' to be the chance of moving to a higher or equal position within

five years [18]. Another example is the research carried out by Hillage & Pollard [24] in which the employability of graduates is assessed on the basis of the sort of job they have found within a given period of time. This research looks, for instance, at whether the job is in line with the graduate's degree and whether it has scope to be 'grown'.

Satisfying work. A broader interpretation takes account of individual career aspirations (knowing why). Those who have a job that fulfils their wishes demonstrate employability. This interpretation of the term employability takes into account the 'internal career' when defining what constitutes 'decent' or 'fulfilling' employment. The internal career is an individual's subjective idea of a career [63]. The experience of success in the career depends on this internal definition of a career. Only transitions to jobs that fulfil the individual's wishes are considered to be indications of employability. Although the employability debate places great emphasis on individual responsibility for career choices and effort, internal careers are seldom taken into account when defining what constitutes 'decent' or 'fulfilling' employment.

Voluntary labour market position. An even broader interpretation considers each voluntary labour market transition as an indication of employability. In career literature, as well, greater attention is being paid to definitions of careers that go beyond professional life. From this point of view, careers are described as 'life-long sequences of role-related experiences' [60]. This view considers careers as a life process and takes into account the various roles that an individual has to fulfil and the possible conflicts that may result from this. Hall [64] emphasises that: "the career, to an increasing extent, will consist of a series of important transitions. Some of these will be job and role transitions, and others will be changes in work caused by transition's in one's personal life". This view is in line with the philosophy behind the concept of the transitional labour market [34]. The idea behind it is that the labour market functions better if people are more able to make transitions to, within and from the labour market or to combine various positions. In this case, 'transitional forms of employment' constitute an alternative to unemployment. What is more, Schmid sees the transitional labour market as a means of guaranteeing employability. He argues that "the borders between the labour market and other social systems have to become more open for transitory states between paid work and gainful non-market activities which preserve and enhance future employability". According to this view, a part of the employability story gets lost when only studying transitions to and between jobs. Transitions to other labour market positions may be favourable for future employability, e.g. someone who stops working to get a degree. The idea that additional labour market transitions should be taken into account to study employability is not yet incorporated in a lot of empirical research.

Measurement

The choice of the transitions studied in employability research depends on the aim and the specific research questions. Research that considers employability important primarily for full employment will most probably only look at the extent to which an individual has a job. Research that concentrates on career opportunities in the internal labour market will perhaps take more account of formal job characteristics such as the level of the position or the type of contract. Research that focuses on the new psychological contract in which individuals sketch out their own career will perhaps also take into account the internal career. Although we define employability as the chance for a job in the internal or external labour market, it may also be of interest to look at other

labour market transitions than those to and between jobs. Research looking at employability in the longer term, for instance, may also pay attention to transitions other than those to employment or between jobs and study their impact on future chances in the labour market.

4.6 Willingness to move

Whether or not an individual will actually make a transition (for example from one job to another), will not only depend on the available alternatives. In addition to this, the ‘desirability to move’ [11] can act as a moderator. This willingness to move is influenced, among other things, by the number of alternatives and the extent to which the current labour market position meets the career expectations (cf. knowing why as an aspect of movement capital). In contrast to the career expectations, the ‘willingness to move’ is often studied in employability research. Mostly, studies look at the willingness to take on another job with a new employer or the willingness to move to another function in the organisation [6,19]. Since all possible labour market transitions fit into our model, the willingness to move can also concern, for instance, the willingness to stop working, the willingness to start a study, the willingness to move to a temporary job etc.

4.7 Shock events

More recent models add a third move initiator to the ‘ease and desirability of movement’ diagram, that is ‘shock events’ [65]. Allen and Griffith define these shocks as “events which lead an individual to make deliberate judgments about remaining with or leaving their job” [66]. The perception of the shock can be negative, neutral or positive. If we take the transition from one job to another as an example, then possible shocks include:

- events outside the job (e.g. the partner who gets a job in another region, etc.)
- personal work-related events (not winning a promotion, a dispute at work, dismissal, etc.)
- events affecting the company (such as a merger, bankruptcy, etc.).

Little employability research investigates the link between transitions in the labour market and shock events. Nonetheless, some ‘shock events’ may help to explain why people make certain transitions, given their ease of movement. For instance, a person may opt to stop working because a family member needs care. The terms ‘willingness to move’, ‘shock events’ and ‘ease of movement’ always have to be examined together if an explanation is to be found as to why a person makes a transition or not.

4.8 Activities maintaining or enhancing one’s movement capital

Meaning

Movement capital can also be *maintained* by certain *activities*. For instance, persons can ensure that their skills do not diminish through training or through task enlargement or enrichment. Pilots, for instance, often practice in a flight simulator. Moreover, these activities can also *enhance* the movement capital by providing new knowledge and

skills [67]. Let us take career guidance as another example. This is an activity that helps clarify career expectations (knowing why), broadens knowledge of the labour market (knowing how) or brings individuals into contact with the right networks (knowing whom). Besides, career guidance can also influence one's willingness to move.

Employability research.

Much of the research into employability examines activities that enhance or at least maintain movement capital. The activities studied include the following [22,27,68]:

- training
- task enlargement
- task enrichment
- job rotation
- career guidance.

Most research on training looks at the extent to which people participate in formal training programs. This can be company training (for employees) or other types of training programs (e.g. for unemployed). Strikingly, employability research focusing on employees pays little attention to the learning possibilities of jobs. Van der Heijden measures the 'learning value of the function' as the individual perception of the extent to which someone increases his or her knowledge and skills within the job [18]. Groot and Maassen van den Brink consider the 'complexity of the job' as a determinant of employability [17]. They assume that the time necessary to be fully productive in the job defines the complexity of the job. They measure this by examining individual perceptions and not by looking at specific characteristics of the job.

Measurement

Task enrichment, task enlargement, career guidance and training are important activities to enhance and maintain a person's movement capital. Besides the amount of training (e.g. the number of hours), it might also be important to have an idea of the skills trained. Concerning company training, for instance, a possible subdivision could be:

- training to learn *general skills* (which can be used both within and outside the company, for instance languages, communication, social skills)
- training to learn *job-related skills*, which are useful in the current job or in a similar job in a different company (for example operating a machine, auto-cad or other office automation training).
- training to learn *company-related skills* (which can only be put to use with the current employer, for example product-related training).

For the employed it is, moreover, important to study the learning possibilities in the job. A possible number of criteria for mapping out the learning possibilities of jobs are offered by Christis [69]. He takes as a basis the 'job demand-control' model developed by Karasek [70]. Karasek compares the demands of a job with the possibilities for control

in the job. Both variables may be high or low. This results in four different types of job situation. The model assumes that high job demands are needed to be able to learn on the job. However, these job demands can only be met if there are adequate control possibilities in the job. Control possibilities are also necessary to be able to learn. They make it possible to develop, refine or alter the best working strategy. Only jobs in which high job demands are combined with high control possibilities offer many learning opportunities.

4.9 Opportunities and willingness to maintain and enhance one's movement capital

Meaning

The extent to which individuals participate in activities to maintain or enhance their movement capital depends heavily on the opportunities they get. The policy adopted by companies and labour market institutions has a significant impact here. In addition, the willingness of the individual to take part in these activities plays an important role.

Employability research

Research that places the emphasis on individual responsibility for one's own career mainly examines the extent to which individuals ensure that they maintain and enhance their employability. Boom and Metselaar, for instance, measure 'responsibility for training' [16]. They place this responsibility primarily with the employee. If responsibility is placed with the individual, a great deal of attention is also paid to individuals' willingness to take part in activities. Factors examined include willingness to engage in functional mobility or willingness to follow training courses [6,16,19]. Van Dam links these aspects of willingness to career anchors [25].

Other research does not place the responsibility purely with the individual but also looks at the opportunities offered by the employer and/or other labour market institutions.

Some studies focus on the opportunities companies offer their employees to increase their employability. Such research mainly examines the presence of certain HR practices such as training, career policy, functional flexibility, etc. Research seldom looks at whether these HR practices are applied for all employees in the company and whether the opportunities are therefore equally distributed. The labour market position or some biographical characteristics can have an impact on the chances employees get for increasing their movement capital.

Research is also undertaken into the opportunities created by other labour market institutions. In most cases, such research looks mainly at the opportunities created by the government to enable people to enhance and maintain their employability. For instance, research examines how the government encourages people to follow training courses or move out of unemployment. Also, measures aimed at encouraging companies to organise training courses or take on unemployed people are examined. In addition, the extent to which the government ensures that everyone has the same opportunities to maintain and increase their employability are also often examined. For instance, the Anglo-Saxon literature on employability pays a lot of attention to the extent to

which certain government policy programs promote the employability of target groups [15,31,42,45].

Measurement

In addition to the individual, employers and the government, there are also other institutions that can influence the chances of individuals to maintain and enhance their employability. For instance, think about trade unions, professional associations, training funds per sector, employment agencies, etc. Those institutions are far too often forgotten in employability research.

5 Conclusion: the value of the employability process model

The conceptual model of the employability process provides insight into the way in which the various components that influence opportunities in the internal and external labour market interact. It is not necessary always to examine the entire process. This would require a vast amount of longitudinal data. We consider the employability process model rather as a road map on which various paths can be marked out. The added value of the model lies in a number of points:

- 1 The model does not only apply to specific target groups such as the unemployed or the employed. It can be applied to the entire active population.
- 2 The model helps clarify which components are included in employability research and why they are relevant. It positions the various research paths that can be taken. In every study it is necessary to indicate which components are examined and why. The model helps highlighting the relationship of these components with other factors of influence.
- 3 The model can be applied with various interpretations of the term employability. In employability research it is therefore necessary to indicate the boundaries of the study:
 - Does the research focus on a career in the internal or the external labour market?
 - Which transitions are considered an indication of employability and why?
- 4 The model demonstrates that various causes can lead to the same result. For instance, a transition to unemployment can be the consequence of a varied combination of factors. Similarly, the same cause can have different consequences. Two individuals with the same movement capital can follow totally different career paths.
- 5 The model can help explain which ‘bottlenecks’ can disrupt the employability process for certain groups. Bergmann Lichtenstein and Mendenhall [71] use the term ‘dysfunctional career spiral’ to refer to the process whereby “an individual is stuck in a pattern of low success, and does not have the ability to shift to new arenas of work”. The employability process model helps identify the causes of such a dysfunctional career spiral.
- 6 From these insights into the causes of dysfunctional career spirals, the model can indicate the areas in which intervention is necessary to ensure that the employability

process runs smoothly for everyone. By outlining the entire employability process, the model can help avoid one-sided intervention. As reflections on employability place responsibility for the career mainly with the individual, there is a tendency to intervene only on the supply side of the labour market. For instance, Peck and Theodore stress that the British government's 'New Deal' program demonstrates "supply-side fundamentalism" [28]. The employability process model demonstrates what impact other players in the labour market have on individuals' labour market opportunities.

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