Sustainable Employability at Work: A Multi-Source Model Moderated by Age

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Introduction

• Employee learning is a prerequisite in order to stay in the race;

• Continuously building up new expertise is needed to increase one’s employability or career potential;

• Organizational performance depends on workers’ employability;
Introduction

• Worldwide, the ageing and dejuvenization of the labour market combined with decreasing opportunities for early retirement, have resulted in an increased need for sustainable employability;

• An integrative approach involving both the organization and the employee in employability research is needed;

• Moreover, this Dutch study intends to contribute to overcome the US bias in career research;
Research objectives

• To investigate the predictive value of learning at the workplace in the light of employees’ career potential;

• To investigate the possible role of employee age in this regard by comparing model outcomes for younger employees (< 40 years) versus over-forties (≥ 40 years);
Theoretical Framework

• Employability is “the continuous fulfilling, acquiring or creating of work through the optimal use of competences” (Van der Heijde & Van der Heijden, 2006, p. 453; Van der Heijden et al., 2009);

• Five-dimensional operationalization combining (a) domain-specific occupational expertise with (b) corporate sense, (c) personal flexibility, (d) anticipation and optimization, and (e) balance
Theoretical framework

• Occupational expertise comprises knowledge and skills, including meta-cognitive ones, and social recognition by important key figures (Van der Heijden, 2000);

• Corporate sense represents the requisite increase in social competence;

• Personal flexibility is defined as the capacity to adapt easily to all kinds of changes in the internal and external labor market;

• Anticipation and optimization is defined as preparing for and adapting to future changes in a personal and creative manner, and striving for the best possible results;

• Balance refers to compromising between opposing employers’ interests as well as one’s own opposing work, career, and private interests (employee) and between employers’ and employees’ interests.
Theoretical framework

• Theory and previous empirical research on age-related stereotyping;

• Several life-span developmental theories and empirical work on ageing and work outcomes;

• Selective Optimization with Compensation (SOC theory; Baltes et al., 1999);
• Life-Span Theory of Control (Heckhausen, Wrosch, & Schulz, 2010)
Hypotheses

• Learning value of the job is positively related to self-rated (H1a) and supervisor-rated (H1b) employability;

• A higher amount of applicability of recently followed training and development programs is positively related to self-rated (H2a) as well as supervisor-rated (H2b) employability;
Hypotheses

• The relationship between learning characteristics of the job and self-rated employability is stronger for older employees (≥ 40 years) in comparison with their younger counterparts (H3);

• The relationship between learning characteristics of the job and supervisor-rated employability is stronger for younger employees (< 40 years) in comparison with their older counterparts (H4);
Participants and procedure

• N = 330 pairs of employees working in different types of jobs at middle and higher level positions, and their supervisors, at a large Dutch company producing building materials (response rate was 91.8%);

• 83.5% male and 16.5% female employees;

• Mean age employees 41 years (sd = 9.20);

• Mean organizational tenure employees 10.74 (sd = 9.61).
Participants and procedure

• 95.0% male and 5% female supervisors;

• Mean age supervisors 43 years
  \((sd = 7.96)\).

Common-method bias has been prevented by this approach.
Measures

• **Learning value** (Van der Heijden & Bakker, 2011; Van der Heijden et al., 2005); six items with Cronbach’s alpha .81;

• **Applicability of training and development** (Van der Heijden, 2002); three items dealing with applicability of T&D in current expertise/job area, in adjacent area, and in completely different or new area with Cronbach’s alpha .58;
Measures

• **Employability** (Van der Heijde & Van der Heijden, 2006; Van der Heijden et al., 2009);

  - occupational expertise (15 items, Cronbach’s alpha .90 for self-ratings and .95 for supervisor ratings);
  - corporate sense (7 items, Cronbach’s alpha .83 for self-ratings and .85 for supervisor ratings);
  - personal flexibility (8 items, Cronbach’s alpha .79 for self-ratings and .88 for supervisor ratings);
  - anticipation and optimization (8 items, Cronbach’s alpha .81 for self-ratings and .89 for supervisor ratings);
  - balance (9 items, Cronbach’s alpha .78 for self-ratings and .84 for supervisor ratings);
Outcomes

• The correlations between the supervisor-rated dimensions were high \((r \geq .73)\), while these were somewhat lower for the self-ratings \((r \geq .38)\), herewith confirming the so-called ‘halo effect’ (Tsui & Ohlott, 1988).

• The agreement between self- and supervisor ratings for the same employability dimensions ranged from .27 to .45.
Outcomes

• Learning characteristics of the job all correlated to employability dimensions in the expected direction, except for the non-significant negative correlation between learning value and self-rated occupational expertise.

• Moreover, the correlations with the different subscales of employability were quite dissimilar, indicating it is important to investigate relations with the unique employability dimensions in addition to one ‘general employability’ factor.
Conclusions and Discussion

• This study shows that different types of learning characteristics predicted different dimensions of employability;

• The finding that learning characteristics were differently related to the unique employability dimensions rather than to aggregated employability construct underscores that learning characteristics of the job have their impact on the individual employee’s development through the unique employability dimensions;
Conclusions and Discussion

• In contrast to applicability of training and development, learning value of the job did not predict occupational expertise. Apparently, learning value of the job is particularly beneficial for an employee’s broader development, rather than for his or her domain-specific growth;
Conclusions and Discussion

• Self-rated balance was only related to the perceived applicability of training and development.

• This outcome shows that career management and HR initiatives aimed at increasing the applicability of training and development in the job may fit into a broader strategy allowing workers to take more personal initiative, which would also be key to creating a balance between employer’s versus employees’ interests, and between employee’s opposing work, career, and private interests;
Conclusions and Discussion

• Surprisingly few relationships appeared to differ across the age groups. Moreover, significant moderation effects of age contrasted our hypotheses based on life-span developmental theories and previous empirical work on ageing and work outcomes;

• An explanation for these unexpected findings may be sought in a possible non-linear moderation effect. That is, the hypothesized moderation effects of age might be non-linear, occurring only after a certain cut-off point, such as 50 or 55 years of age [cf. Armstrong-Stassen and Schlosser (2008) who found that job development climate plays an important role in the retention of older workers above the age of 50].
Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research

• All data have been collected using survey research only (risk of response set consistencies);

• Only cross-sectional data have been used;

• More research is needed into the generalizability of our outcomes to other occupational settings and/or countries;

• Future work incorporating different operationalizations of age and for training and development is needed;

• Relational demography research could help us further too;

• More research into the relationships between worker’s perceptions of HR practices or bundles and learning processes is needed.
Practical Implications

• Both employers and individual employees should align their efforts aimed at employability enhancement depending upon the specific shortcomings in competencies the employee experiences;

• A clear insight into employability shortcomings is highly dependent upon the use of valid and reliable evaluations;

• Given the differences in self- and supervisor ratings of the employability dimensions, it is advisable to communicate about these discrepancies in order to optimize performance appraisal situations.
Practical Implications

• Employees should not just learn by means of courses or training programs, but by working together with their supervisors, and by really applying the newly learning in practice;

• Employees need to perform a job wherein they experience (urgent) requirements to develop their talents and capabilities further, and need to be actually encouraged to do so;