Toward the Employability-Link Model: Current Employment Transition to Future Employment Perspectives

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This article goes into a critical analysis of the concept of employability, its development across historical periods, its components, and different strategic approaches to enhance workers’ employability throughout their career. Given the need for a systematic analysis and more empirical research in the field, the authors come up with the so-called employability-link model that is aimed to guide future practitioners and researchers as far as their specific choices as regard core components of the concept that ought to be made. The article concludes with a thorough onset of possible future research questions that are assumed to be of importance given the current labor market situation. The employability-link model has implications for individual and organizational career interventions aimed at increasing life-long employability.

Keywords: employability, flexibility, human resource development

During the last decade, attention to research and practice in employability has increased specifically in the United Kingdom and Europe in terms of social policy (McQuaid & Lindsay, 2005) and in the United States in terms of individual skill development and adaptability (Fugate & Ashforth, 2003). For generations,
lifetime employment with the same working organization or institute was considered the norm. Lifetime employment, especially at larger organizations, was a privilege offered to loyal employees. Currently, lifetime employability is emphasized. A basic definition of employability is “where employers provide interesting jobs and opportunities to develop skills . . . [for a] mobile career” (Pearce & Randel, 2004, p. 82). Lifetime refers to the career as a whole, from someone’s career start to retirement.

The recent attention to employability (Bonfiglioli, Moir, & Ambrosini, 2006; Carbery & Garavan, 2005) is inspired by organizational needs for flexibility in a changing labor market, by the present job mobility rates (change of employer and/or occupation), and by the growing pool of “free agents” or consultants. This might be interpreted as a forerunner to a labor market where working on a payroll will be an exception (Bridges, 1994). Yet no matter how one’s employment is maintained, expertise or competence within a certain field is the key to guaranteeing one’s employability.

Being an expert and maintaining one’s expertise and employability are by no means easy tasks. However, the potential of a given organization to perform optimally in global markets depends on employees’ capabilities to develop, cultivate, and maintain fundamental qualifications. Job qualifications are continuously changing at an ever-increasing rate (Schnabel, 2000). A characteristic of these changes is that not only do they produce new expertise needs but also, at the same time, they create new opportunities for learning.

The qualifications that are required for a job are becoming increasingly complex, whereas simultaneously, the “half life” of these qualifications is becoming shorter. Employees who are able to survive and satisfy the current needs are the ones with the most up-to-date knowledge and skills and the capability to continuously build new expertise. As it is hard to predict labor market requirements, achieving flexibility in functioning seems to be the key criterion that enables an employee to remain competitive.

The concept of employability came into use around 1955 (Versloot, Glaudé, & Thijssen, 1998). However, it is only since the late 1990s that employability has been empirically studied. Employability is studied from different angles and levels (individual, organizational, and industrial) across a wide range of academic disciplines, such as business and management studies, human resource management, human resource development, psychology, educational science, and career theory. Although employability is the focus of attention, the concept can be confusing when used across different contexts and time spans (see also Johns, 2006). However, few studies have tried to integrate these different perspectives (Fugate, Kinicki, & Ashforth, 2004; Thijssen & Van der Heijden, 2003; Van der Heijde & Van der Heijden, 2006). The purpose of this study is to clarify the concept of employability and to develop the framework underlying the employability-link model. First, we will go into an analysis of the historical development of employability. Next, various conceptual problems regarding employability in today’s context will be discussed. Subsequently, we will go into current employability
strategies as part of organizational human resource approaches and present the model. The article concludes with some research questions based on a theoretical model that, in our opinion, deserves further attention in both research and practice in the years to come.

Definitions of Employability

Employability may be defined as follows: The possibility to survive in the internal or external labor market. This tentative definition of employability is general rather than specific, that is to say, an umbrella definition to start with, and to cover the wide array of definitions used. As we will describe later in this contribution, meanings of employability have changed during the last 30 to 40 years. Definitions that are used today can differ a lot from the ones that were previously in use. The same applies to company policies developed to cope with employability-related problems.

Connotations of employability can differ as well. Sometimes, the term employability has a negative connotation, especially among groups struggling with a low degree of career self-management. But more often, employability and job market mobility have a positive connotation, often related to self-management in the labor market, in sharp contrast with the criticism of high turnover and the lack of “permanent” jobs.

Employability looks like an attractive but confusing professional buzzword. Definitions and synonyms of employability are abundant (De Grip, Van Loo, & Sanders, 2004; Forrier & Sels, 2003; Fugate et al., 2004; Harvey, 2001; Thijssen & Van der Heijden, 2003; Van der Heijden & Thijssen, 2003; Van Lammeren, 1999; Versloot et al., 1998). Each definition emphasizes a diversity of characteristics of (potential) employees, for instance, physical and cognitive suitability, learning, flexibility, adaptation, and mobility, to mention but a few, yet all referring to employment as an outcome (see Van der Heijde & Van der Heijden, 2006, for a thorough overview). Employability is believed to accommodate some or all of these aspects, depending on the angle from which the concept is studied, and consequently, it is a multidimensional and variegated (Fugate et al., 2004) concept.

Historical Developments: The Emergence of the Protean or Boundaryless Career

In the ’90s, publications about the end of the ordinary job (Bridges, 1994) and about self-employment for everybody (Hakim, 1994) were prevalent, the idea that careers were no longer related to just one employer or even to one job with the same employer was certainly not new. By 1976, Hall speculated that the increasing number of changes in working organizations would lead to the dominance of another type of career, that is, the so-called protean career (Hall, 1976, p. 201). The epithet, protean, is etymologically derived from Proteus, the
old Greek sea god, who could rapidly transform himself, when needed, into various shapes, like a tree, a lion, a snake, and so on. Accordingly, Hall interpreted the worker’s ability to change as being inherent to a protean career. He observed a clear breakthrough of this type of career after a period of dominance of company-related careers in the ’80s (Hall & Associates, 1996; Hall & Mirvis, 1996).

As such, careers increasingly have become boundaryless in the sense that during career progression, more boundaries are crossed (e.g., occupational, departmental, and organizational) in comparison to earlier and more predictable hierarchical careers (DeFillippi & Arthur, 1994; Gunz, Evans, & Jalland, 2000). When careers are less predictable, a thorough analysis of needed competencies or employability is a crucial starting point for all career policy activities (Van der Heijde & Van der Heijden, 2006).

The use of the term in scientific and professional publications goes back to the ’50s (Feintuch, 1955) when employability was supposed to be an important determinant for securing a job, especially for paid work in the (near) future. In the ’60s and ’70s, authors did not deal with the mobility of employees within the internal or external labor markets. Instead, they dealt with the problems of unemployed persons and the difficulties they encountered in accessing the labor market. Once on the payroll of a company, the opportunity to stay employed was rather high, given the dominant culture of lifetime employment (Magnum, 1976; Orr, 1973). Currently, given the protean or boundaryless character of current careers, employability is important in the light of future employment opportunities.

The Three Perspectives on Employability

Throughout time, employability is important for employment; yet employment is not a well-defined goal or objective. Dependent on time and context, different purposes, interventions, target groups, measures, and activities are discerned. Correspondingly, employability approaches differ according to the perspective that is taken. During the last three decades, three perspectives have been of particular importance (Versloot et al., 1998): (a) the society, (b) the company, and (c) the individual worker (see Table 1).

The societal or national perspective comprises full employment at a country level. For a society as a whole, employability is an indicator of the working population’s opportunity to gain full employment, that is, a low unemployment rate and economic health. At the company level or organizational perspective, employment implies work, that is, all the jobs done by employees in a certain company for compensation. For an employer, employability is an indicator of the opportunity to match supply and demand in a changing organization. Finally, the individual perspective comprises employment in the sense of an attractive job. For an individual worker, employability is an indicator of his or her opportunity to acquire and to keep an attractive job in the internal or external labor market. All three perspectives imply the “possibility to survive in the labor market” and
TABLE 1: Employability-Related Developments Across Three Historical Periods (Versloot, Glaudé, & Thijssen, 1998)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Period</th>
<th>Seventies</th>
<th>Eighties</th>
<th>Nineties</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Questions</td>
<td>Employability seen as flexibility of a society.</td>
<td>Employability seen as flexibility of a company.</td>
<td>Employability seen as flexibility of workers.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Purpose of employability</td>
<td>Full employment and decrease of collective financial burden.</td>
<td>Efficient and effective human resource management without a lack or surplus of personnel.</td>
<td>Individual opportunity for a job on the internal or external labor market.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interventions at what level</td>
<td>Central or local authorities.</td>
<td>Public or private (larger) companies.</td>
<td>Individual employees.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Major target groups</td>
<td>School leavers without useful studies and underprivileged people.</td>
<td>Large groups of personnel in lower and middle ranks in companies under reorganization.</td>
<td>Everybody, employed or unemployed, who wants employment.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Important measures and activities</td>
<td>Through governmental programs, employers are supported in carrying responsibility for employment by increasing the labor market qualifications of the people with a weak position in the labor market.</td>
<td>The “flexible firm” implies the management of intraorganizational staffing problems, assuming both quantitative flexibility (number of periphery workers) and qualitative flexibility (employability or functional flexibility of core workers).</td>
<td>The individual’s ability to cope with labor market problems implies career self-management that has to be encouraged by someone’s employer. Companies will offer facilities to improve the responsibility and initiative of employees.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Changes in Perspective Through the Decades

In the ‘70s (and before), attention was focused on employability measures aimed at full employment, with interventions at a national level (Feintuch, 1955; Forsyth & Mininger, 1966; Orr, 1973). The collective care of the government was primarily meant to help unemployed citizens to find a job. As such, public care implied measures aimed at job market entry. Entry into the internal labor market of a company, especially of a larger one, as a rule, stood for entry to lifetime employment with the same employer. Hence, the government’s perspective of developing entry-level skills in underemployed and unemployed workers was fully understandable. Employability in the ‘70s concerned a relatively transparent and simple phenomenon.

However, in the ‘80s and ‘90s, the situation changed. In the ‘80s (and the early ‘90s), attention was on controlling the turbulence of intraorganizational job markets. Working organizations (especially larger ones) emphasized in their policies that they complied with, at least for their permanent staff, lifetime employment as a guiding principle, in spite of changes in the kind and the amount of employment.

Core, Periphery, and External Workers

Companies embraced the principles of the so-called flexible firm (Atkinson, 1984), making a division between three kinds of employees: (a) core workers (permanent), (b) periphery workers (temporary), and (c) external workers (free agents). These three categories of workers offered different contributions to a company’s flexibility, that is, the opportunity to adapt to changing situations and to changing staffing demands. The core workers were seen as the primary segment of employees. Training facilities and career development support were used to guarantee their employability and their functional flexibility. Flexibility or the ability to switch from one job to another in the internal labor market was expected of the permanent staff and important for implementing changes in products, services, and working processes. These core workers required relatively high wages to retain them. According to the concept of the flexible firm, the opportunities for training and development and other kinds of employment benefits were worse for the secondary segment, that is, the periphery or so-called temporary workers who were needed for fluctuations in staffing demands (see also Barley & Kunda, 2006, in their excellent contribution on “contracting” issues and contingent work; O’Mahony & Bechky, 2006).

In many countries and organizations, this inequality between categories of workers resulted in elaborate and “tough” discussions between employers and labor unions. Labor unions focused on negotiating for collective agreements for all workers, whereas employers wanted the freedom to approach various groups in different ways. Employers wanted to guarantee the employment continuity of the primary segment, that is, the core workers. Especially in Great
Britain, the flexibility debate (Beardwell, Holden, & Claydon, 2004; Brewster, 1998) was quite heated.

In the ‘90s and beyond, employability was a concern at the level of the individual employee. In this period, employees’ own responsibility for career development and their ability to cope with changes in the internal and external labor markets have been increasingly emphasized. On one hand, the latitude and freedom of choice for career self-management have increased considerably. On the other hand, the protection offered by intraorganizational career claims and by chances for promotion based on seniority has decreased. Currently, this is the case for the employees belonging to the primary segment of companies, a segment that has been reduced in many countries (Brewster, 1998).

Working with one company for decades and staying in the same occupation during an entire career have become rare phenomena. A career currently permeates the borders of companies: It is called a “boundaryless career based on an ‘inter-organizational concept’” (Arthur, 1994; Mirvis & Hall, 1994). Given the conglomerate of more or less autonomous divisions and business units that belong to the same multinationals, the indication, interorganizational, cannot always be interpreted formally and literally. Often, inside these huge companies, one can detect a “hidden boundaryless career effect” (Arthur, 1994, p. 296), that is, mobility between more or less independent organizational divisions.

The Boundaryless Career and the Modern Psychological Contract

The interest in the boundaryless career phenomenon is connected to changing notions of the social contract or the psychological contract (Argyris, 1960; Levinson, Price, Munden, Mandl, & Solley, 1962; Schein, 1969; Uchitelle, Battenberg, & Kochan, 2007) between employer and worker, defined as the whole of implicit mutual expectations that both parties have about career development, planning, and management (see also Freese, 2007; Tekleab & Taylor, 2003). A modern psychological contract incorporates possible changes that have appeared among both partners’ (managers’ and employees’) perceptions and expectations toward each other, regarding career self-management responsibilities concerning employability (Herriot, 1992, 1995; Rousseau, 1995). The modern psychological contract, also referred to as the new social contract (Altman & Post, 1996) or the new protean career contract (Hall & Moss, 1998), leaves room for quite radically changing priorities.

These new expectations include the responsibility of employing organizations to offer facilities that support and/or improve the individual worker’s employability. The organization provides insight into internal job mobility conditions and opportunities, competency profiles, career perspectives instruments, and training and development for future jobs in the current or another company.

Employees, on the other hand, are expected to be ready and capable of using these facilities and to take responsibility for career choices and efforts.
As such, self-initiatives and the ability to cope are the basics of a modern psychological contract (Van der Heijden, 2005). More and more, it is assumed that employees should strive for career self-management, whereas managers are supposed to offer the desired support. One cannot deny that this comprises a thorough change in thinking about career development. Specifically, a considerable shift in responsibility is being made in the classical difference between career management (as a role of the company) and career planning (as a role of the individual; Gutteridge & Otte, 1983).

Obviously, the historical outline in a decades-related overview that is provided in Table 1 does not fully incorporate the nuances in beliefs and behaviors evident in every day reality. It is not easy to split up reality into neatly discernable phases and periods that take place in various countries at the same time and in the same order. Table 1 depicts an approximate characterization of a historical development that exhibits the same trend in most Western countries.

A vanguard of employers and employees has embraced the modern psychological contract and the modern view on employability. But some laggards resist these changes or give lip service to these modern ideas. The amount of support for the notion of self-management as the core of employability differs from employer to employer, from employee to employee, and also from author to author. Self-management as the core of employability differs within definitions of employability from narrow to broad, from being included in varying degrees with traditional interventions, and from the employee and the employer perspectives. However, the gradual shift in emphasis toward employability issues during the last decades, as described in Table 1, cannot be denied, whether we like it or not.

**Conceptual Differences Regarding Employability**

Different conceptualizations and operationalizations of the concept of employability exist in scientific or managerial publications, which provide rough descriptions or lists of some characteristics of employability with widely varying emphasis. To give some clear examples, Bloch and Bates (1995) emphasized the power to guide one’s own career. In Waterman, Waterman, and Collard (1994), the resilience to cater to changing requirements is essential. While Hyatt (1995) stressed the attitude toward change, Forrier and Sels (2003) stressed the transferability and broadness of occupational and self-management skills used to acquire other jobs. Raemdonck (2006) focuses on self-management characteristics related to individual and organizational effects on future labor market opportunities.

Conceptual views reflect the influence of the historical periods. Currently, the emphasis is concerned with personal adequacy for work and definitely does not refer to something the employer and/or the government can provide. However, to what extent employers and governments can help individual workers to develop their work-related competencies or to get (other) jobs is seen as important, too. Yet in recent publications, authors do not see government assistance as an important component of the employability definition, just a minor component, and definitely not as the main component needed to
survive in the labor market (Fugate et al., 2004; Van der Heijde & Van der Heijden, 2006).

Some authors (see, for example, Gaspersz & Ott, 1996) define employability as the variety of jobs that individuals can do properly, that is, as their current qualifications for functional flexibility in the internal or external labor market. Following this definition, multiskilled workers are equal to employable workers because their current employability radius is relatively large. A majority of authors, however, opt for a broader focus and adhere to a less limited definition. They highly support the idea that a wide array of occupational qualifications is an important component of employability, but they do not see the current range of qualifications as identical with employability. This is why they include yet another component, that is, the personal competencies that are needed to improve the workers’ employability radius, especially their learning and career planning competencies (Forrier & Sels, 2003; Kirschner & Thijssen, 2005; Lankhuijzen, 2002; Van der Heijden, 2005).

**Employability Radius**

This brings us to three different conceptual components of employability that may be considered as overlapping concentric circles, from small to wide or from more limited to broader descriptions of employability. First, the most limited and core definition is concerned with personal adequacy to perform a job, that is, somebody’s current employability or *employability radius*. Employability radius is the most common component in current employability descriptions. No single author excludes this component that can be defined as the whole of current personal possibilities to perform a diversity of jobs properly.

**Employability Competencies**

Second, a majority of authors, as we mentioned earlier, perceive this core definition as too limited and have broadened the definition to include some personal competencies, which are called *employability competencies* or *employability skills*, especially learning competencies and career competencies (Forrier & Sels, 2003; Kirschner & Thijssen, 2005). These employability skills determine whether workers are able and ready to use opportunities beyond their current employability radius. These competencies determine the opportunities for exploitation and widening of the current employability radius. The second definition can be described as follows: The whole of personal factors influencing future labor market perspectives that includes the employability radius and employability competencies. Contextual conditions are not taken into account yet.

**Contextual Conditions**

The third and broadest definition takes the *contextual conditions* into account. This definition encompasses the whole of personal and contextual
factors influencing future labor market perspectives. This definition includes all kinds of factors at the level of the working organization (and even at the level of the society) that can influence the future labor situation of workers. Although nobody will deny that these factors might be of importance, they are seldom included as part of the employability concept (Forrier & Sels, 2003; Hall & Associates, 1996; Waterman et al., 1994).

The Three Conceptual Components as Concentric Circles

From the end of the ’80s, some authors were especially concerned with aspects of the second component, that is, the personal competencies for broadening labor market opportunities in the future (Bhaerman & Spill, 1988; Charner, 1988; Johnson & Troppe, 1992; Kirschner & Thijsen, 2005; Lankard, 1990; McLaughlin, 1995; Raemdonck, 2006; Saterfiel & McLarty, 1995). The ability to use and broaden future labor market opportunities is often referred to as employability skills (McLaughlin, 1995) or career management competencies (Ball, 1999). Research questions following this approach are aimed at the possibility of distinguishing, identifying, and improving learning skills and career skills, preferably at an early career stage.

In our opinion, employability skills are essential for an employee’s behavioral possibilities in the labor market, whereas contextual characteristics are important conditions for someone’s success, although they are not part of the essence of employability. This is why we prefer the second definition of employability. More precisely, we would like to define the concept of lifetime employability as the behavioral tendency directed at acquiring, maintaining, and using qualifications aimed at coping with a changing labor market during all career stages.

The normatively colored discussions on employability skills are referring to, whether desirable or not, the responsibility of employing organizations to create advantageous conditions for the improvement of deficient employability skills and to compensate for deficiencies in these skills by offering special services (like extra help with career choices, tailor made retraining, etc.). Also in case, contextual conditions are included in the definition, even then, the employability strategies of companies can differ a lot. There is, for instance, a world of difference between organizations that passively offer career services and ones that actively stimulate career self-management programs.

In summary, we can distinguish three different categories of employability definitions based on the three conceptual components producing these definitions that can be seen as concentric circles. The majority of definitions that are portrayed in the literature include the first component that is distinguished, that is, somebody’s current employability radius, and the second component, that is, employability skills or personal qualifications to survive in the labor market, while ignoring the third one, that is, contextual factors.
Employability Strategies

The differences in employability conceptualizations and definitions offer an opportunity to classify three different strategic choices of companies beginning with the attitude toward possibilities for investment. This classification combines various characteristics presented in earlier parts of this contribution. Furthermore, this division is based on practical experiences and face validity rather than empirical research. First, we will discuss the broadening strategy, followed by the selling strategy, and finally the consuming strategy.

Broadening Strategy

A broadening strategy is especially appropriate in an education-enhancing culture. Companies that emphasize this strategy will create contextual conditions that are aimed at broadening the current employability radius of their personnel and that guarantee or rather enhance their employability. This strategy can include conditions such as a wide array of specific and general training activities, facilities to stimulate participation (time and/or money), and training programs based on learning principles that fit the participants’ characteristics. These conditions definitely do not have to be restricted to formal training and development opportunities. They can also involve stimulation of workplace support and learning, self-directed learning, and so on, that is, to say, more informal opportunities. Some available broadening strategies go even deeper. This is the case when the services are aimed at learning how to learn or the acquirement of certain learning competencies, in particular, the capability and the willingness for more self-management in acquiring new qualifications.

Selling Strategy

A selling strategy is especially appropriate in a mobility or transition-supporting culture. Companies that emphasize a selling strategy will create contextual conditions that are aimed at selling and exploiting the talents of their employees by helping them to find other paid jobs inside or outside the organization and without an evident broadening of the current employability radius. This second strategy includes all possible conditions that can facilitate the transition from one’s current job to another one, like providing an overview of vacancies in relevant external and internal labor markets, offering possibilities for assessment of the qualities of employees, supporting career choice, providing outplacement services, and so on. A selling strategy can also be more elaborate, namely, when companies create conditions that are aimed at acquiring good career competencies, that is, competencies that enable employees to sell their talent in the labor market (without first broadening their current employability). Examples are coaching for self-assessments and offering training aimed at networking and at techniques for applying the newly learned knowledge and skills.
**Consuming Strategy**

The third strategy is called the *consuming strategy* and is especially appropriate in a contract-limiting culture. This strategy can often be characterized as just a “laissez-faire” approach. Companies that emphasize a consuming strategy consider the current occupational competencies of employees as something they can use and exploit without investments from their side. Management in such companies interprets the abilities of employees as consumer goods. Planning ahead and broadening the mobility opportunities of employees is not part of the human resource management philosophy. A clear insight into the skills that are needed by current workers arises ad hoc by incidentally pulling (offering another job) or pushing (urging to leave as current job is to cease).

The third strategy is highly risky as the value of available occupational competencies will gradually decrease, for example, because they are not sufficiently used and maintained or they become obsolete, that is, outdated. Being the best in one’s field means keeping abreast of new developments, regularly fine-tuning one’s expertise and fighting against rapid *obsolescence*, which refers to “the degree to which organizational professionals lack the up-to-date knowledge or skills necessary to maintain effective performance in either their current or future work roles” (Kaufman, 1974, p. 23). Most jobs are subject to high-speed changes and increased expertise needs. This implies that even gifted people not given the opportunity to employ their faculties tend not to be regarded as experts (Van der Heijden, 2005).

A consuming strategy can be a matter of naivety or intent. In case of naivety, it is obvious that it is not a real strategy. In case of intent, education-enhancing or mobility-supporting services are not offered. Keeping up to date or finding another job is seen as a part of personal responsibility and self-management. This implies that the employee is expected to invest time and money to protect his or her employability.

**Organizational and Individual Levels**

The three types of employability strategies at a company (organizational) level that are discussed so far can be found at an individual level as well. Employees can be distinguished depending on their individual employability strategies as (a) broadeners, (b) sellers, and (c) consumers. *Broadeners* are heavy users of education and training opportunities, without paying attention to the possibility for exploitation of the acquired skills within the labor market. *Sellers* move themselves easily within the labor market when they are looking for another job, even without extra training. They have some career skills and use them. *Consumers* neither pay attention to possibilities for broadening nor to the possibilities for exploiting their occupational skills. They assume implicitly or explicitly that their competence candle will burn long enough to get their (early) retirement, so they acquire a waiting attitude, either
out of naivety (without thinking about anything) or by intent (expecting that they will get job offers without any investment).

The three distinguished strategies (both at the organizational level and at the individual level) are in essence generalizations. In practice, they will seldom be found in a pure form or in a nicely balanced mix. Further research is needed to determine which factors contribute to certain strategic choices and under which circumstances these strategies are most effective for the flexibility of a company and of its individual employees.

**Toward A Conceptual Model: Conclusions and Future Research Perspectives**

We have illustrated that employability goals and means have shifted during the last decades. Employability strategies that are currently used by employers (and employees) seem to differ from strategies used earlier. From a conceptual point of view, a variety of differences in definitions was encountered. Because of these shifts and differences, it is not easy to build theory regarding the relationship between the various components that are part of employability and to determine the influence of the components on employment, that is, work in the future.

Notwithstanding these difficulties, within this framework, the employability-link model has been developed and is the result of an effort to integrate these various components (Thijssen, 1998; see Figure 1).

**Underlying Assumptions of the Employability-Link Model**

The construction of the employability-link model is based on the following assumptions:

1. Employability concerns a compound phenomenon that has an effect on employment and on work in the future, and is seen as the whole of interrelated components that influence the employment perspectives of workers in the (near) future.
2. The core component of employability is the current employability radius of an individual worker, that is, the diversity of jobs and tasks someone can fulfill properly because of his or her current competencies.
3. Tasks (or clusters of tasks, like jobs and job types) that are performed adequately or that can be performed adequately by an individual worker are in general hard to determine directly. That is why research on current employability often is focused on predictors of employability, in particular, dispositional characteristics (for example, self-efficacy), ascriptive characteristics (for example, age), and/or experience characteristics (for example, educational history). Actually, these are indicators that will influence one’s future employment indirectly because of the mediating role of one’s current employability radius (see also Van der Heijden, 2005).
4. If someone’s current employability radius is considered as (too) limited, broadening or enlarging it could be a strategic choice. The possibilities for enlargement are determined by two types of conditions: personal conditions, that is, the
presence of personal learning competencies (for example, the capability and willingness to acquire new job qualifications during a formal training program) and/or contextual conditions (for example, training facilities that are offered at a company level or even at national level).

5. An enlarged employability radius of employees does not always have a significant effect on future employment perspectives as this depends on certain transition conditions that play an interactive role as well. For this interactive role, two types of conditions are important: personal conditions (career competencies, for example, career planning and applying skills) and contextual conditions (for example, career management support by the employer and the labor market measures at a societal level).

Although we do not deny the importance of conditions at a national level, we have not integrated these into our model. Our contribution is focused on employability issues of employers and employees. The five components, summarized above, are the core elements of the employability-link model as depicted in Figure 1. The employability-link model can be useful as a frame of reference for theory building and research and also for practical strategic analyses.

**FIGURE 1: The Employability-Link Model (Thijssen, 1998)**

Research Questions for Further Scholarly Dialogue on Employability

Looking back at the problems that have been considered in this article, a variety of research questions can be put forward. These research questions can be clustered around four main themes:

1. First, it is important to carry out research on the meaning of the *psychological contract* in relation to other employability-related aspects. Some related research questions are the following:
   - To what extent can one perceive a shift in the content and character of the psychological contract in the past period?
   - Are there any differences noticeable in terms of the content of the psychological contract between various target groups, especially differences between younger and older employees, between employees in the primary
and the secondary segment, between lower and higher educated employees, and between employees working in lower and higher positions (managers and employees) in a company?

• To what extent do differences in the psychological contract have an effect on training participation and job transition?

• Can one detect significant increasing congruencies or discrepancies in mutual expectations on career management between employers (managers) and employees?

2. Second, research is needed to gain more insight into employability concepts that are used. Some examples of related research questions are the following:

• Which similarities and differences can we find in employability definitions across companies, and how are they related to one another?

• Which differences in perceptions toward the concept of employability can be found among employees, and to what extent are these differences primary/secondary segment related?

• To what extent are intraorganizational differences in perceptions toward the concept of employability (for example, between professionals working at several managerial levels in a hierarchy) responsible for problems in the implementation of an employability policy in a company?

3. A third important research theme involves the employability strategies that are realized in practice. Possible research questions are the following:

• To what extent do we find, in practice, employability strategies (generalized, as well as mixed up) in today’s companies?

• Which employability strategies are recognized among different target groups in the labor market, especially among employees of larger and smaller companies, as well as among free agents? And how can we explain these differences in strategies?

• Is there a relationship between these strategies, on one hand, and contextual and personal conditions, on the other hand?

4. A last research theme concerns the evaluation of the theoretical and practical assumptions beyond the employability-link model. Possible related research questions are the following:

• To what extent do we have empirically based reasons for the central axis in the employability-link model, in particular, empirically based insights that can explain the difference between dropouts and survivors of reorganizations?

• Which specific employability skills are the most important and effective ones in the framework of conditions in the employability-link model? And which contextual conditions are suitable to encourage or to improve these skills or to compensate for them?

• Which predictors can be considered to be the best proxies for current employability?

Obviously, employability involves a phenomenon that is diffuse or at least multiformal in character. This is why many other research questions are possible. The different emphasis in definitions and strategies creates differences in insights, but economic circumstances as well, determine the urgency and needed priority regarding future research, especially if we look at employability aimed at external labor market opportunities. Employability facilities for boundaryless careers, over the borders of a company, seem (apart from a situation of personnel shrinkage) especially attractive for employers that are confronted with a supply-driven labor market. In case of a demand-driven labor market, it is more attractive for employees rather than for employers. That is why it seems plausible that different employability views regarding interorganizational mobility will be supported by both parties
(employers and employees) although they are driven by different motives and may easily change their minds depending on economic circumstances.

To conclude, because of the recent increase in attention on employability, professionals and academics often ask the question whether employability is a passing hype. We believe that this question has to be answered negatively. It might be possible that the term employability at a certain moment will be replaced by another term, but this does not imply that the phenomenon as such will disappear or that the individualization-related developments in Western countries that stimulated the modern psychological contract will lose significance.

References


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