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INTRODUCTION



## Introduction to special issue on HRM and employability: mutual gains or conflicting outcomes?

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Employability is commonly understood as an individual's chances of employment in internal and/or external labour markets (Forrier, Verbruggen, & De Cuyper, 2015; Rothwell & Arnold, 2007). Given the contemporary employment landscape – one characterized by technological changes, ageing populations, and increasingly competitive organizational environments – employability is attracting growing attention from HRM researchers and practitioners alike. This increased interest is in part motivated by the realization that employability implies a win-win situation: employable workers have stocks of knowledge, skills, abilities, and they are flexible and open to change. Their profiles offer competitive advantage for organizations. At the same time, individuals are not bound to the organization and can move jobs when desired or required (De Cuyper & De Witte, 2011; Van der Heijde & Van der Heijden, 2006). When viewed in this way, employability is a shared responsibility between employees and employers (i.e., Clarke, 2018) in which employers provide HRM policies and practices that stimulate employability and employees use these opportunities to become and remain employable.

Despite this cogent argument, however, the role of the employer and specifically their investments in HRM policies and practices are largely absent in the current employability discourse. Both in research and in practice, employability is usually regarded as an *individual* asset in which employees carry almost all responsibility for employability maintenance and development (Clarke, 2018; Forrier, De Cuyper, & Akkermans, 2018). This is captured, for example, in the discourse on the protean career (Hall, 2004) and on career self-management (King, 2004). The

neglect of the role and responsibility of the employer is not new and has been criticized by McQuaid and Lindsay (2005) fifteen years ago, but remarkably little has been done to remedy this neglect and advance knowledge and practice. We address this issue head on in this special issue and illuminate the role for the employer by focusing on the relationship between HRM investments and workers' employability. In so doing we make several contributions.

First, understanding the role of the employer and the possibility of mutual benefit addresses concerns related to the employability management paradox. The paradox suggests that employer investments in employability are needed in view of for instance flexibility in personnel staffing, yet such investments are also risky if employable workers are more qualified and motivated to leave the organization (De Cuyper & De Witte, 2011). Second, restricting employability to an individual asset and individual responsibility neglects the observation that many individuals continue to be embedded in employment relationships with mutual responsibilities. This implies that factors that could boost employability should also be sought in the employers' investments in HRM policies and practices and not only related to the individual workers. On a related note, understanding those factors would enable practitioners and policy-makers to develop suitable and inclusive employability interventions that could ultimately help to achieve sustainability for greater numbers of workers in the labour market.

Against this background, the objective of this special issue is to inform how HRM investments affect workers' employability. The potential role of HRM investments in contributing or affecting employability is substantial and illustrated in the set of four papers included in this special issue. The specific employability investments and findings of these studies are summarized in the next section, which is followed by lessons learned from these papers and guidance for further research.

### **This Special Issue**

The main findings of the four special issue papers illustrate diverse views of employers' HRM investments in employability, and these often differ depending on organizational context and employee population. Hence, we take the four papers as our point of departure and as such do not provide an all-inclusive overview of all possible forms these investments can take.

#### ***HRM investments in employability as a strategic choice***

In the first study in this special issue, Cerdin, Liao, and Sharma present a strategically-oriented view of HRM investments in employability, such

that organizations are justified or well-served to invest in the training of employees who are considered especially talented. Using a sample of global talented employees working within a multinational company, the authors argue and demonstrate that those with high dispositional employability (defined as a constellation of individual differences that increase adaptability to work and careers, Fugate & Kinicki, 2008) are more likely to perceive that they have good internal career opportunities. This relationship is stronger when employees reported investments from the organization in the form of training opportunities. In addition, when employees have a present or future temporal focus (i.e., allocating attention to the present or future instead of the past), their dispositional employability increases which in turn contributes to perceived internal career opportunities (mediation effect). Based on their findings, Cerdin et al. regard ensuring that talented employees perceive internal career opportunities as a way to bind them to the organization. Retaining talented employees through making HRM investments in training is critical for adaptability and competitiveness at the firm level. The implication is that employable workers see career options within the organization and thus stay if they are adequately managed and supported; and providing training opportunities signals that the organization values its employees' and their interests.

### ***HRM investments in employability as a shared responsibility or co-creation***

The second study in this special issue by Rodrigues, Butler and Guest focuses on external employability (i.e., perceived job chances outside the current organization) in contrast to Cerdin et al.'s focus on internal employability. Using a sample of graduates followed from the final year at a UK university into the first two years of their careers, the authors find that on average employable young graduates are less committed to the organization and more likely to intend to leave. However, when they report career development investments from their organization, this results in both increased external employability *and* in more organizational attachment. Rodrigues et al. use social exchange theory to frame employability as a mutual responsibility of employers and employees with potential associated mutual gains. Remarkably, the relationship between perceived external employability and organizational attachment is even stronger among young graduates with a protean career orientation who proactively pursue opportunities for career development. In short, the authors conclude that young graduates express attachment to the organization and successfully nurture their employability, when both

the organization (in the form of HRM investments for career development) and young graduates themselves (in the form of a protean career orientation) signal that they care about their career development. Moreover, this study shows that the signaling effect of employers' HRM investments only pays off when organizations make significant investments in career development: a modest application was found to have little impact on employability.

In the third study, Solberg, LaPointe, and Dysvik offer a similar view on HRM investments in employability based on co-creation or an interactive and interdependent partnership between employees and organizations. Using a sample of employees working in a Norwegian company, and drawing on the psychological contract as an analytic framework, the authors probe whether the fulfilment of developmental promises made to employees makes employees more willing to adapt to the organization's changing work requirements (coined as willingness to be internally employable), along with what role line managers play in facilitating adaptability willingness by way of providing developmental support. The results show that it is not the developmental promise in isolation but the fulfilment of such a promise that makes employees more willing to adapt. The study underscores the important role of line managers in supporting and delivering on promises of development, as doing so enhances their workers' willingness to be internally employable.

### ***HRM investments in employability as a Corporate Social Responsibility***

The fourth study of this special issue by Dello Russo and colleagues argues that employers have a social responsibility regarding older workers in employability-related matters. Using a sample of individuals from 30 countries from all GLOBE cultural clusters, they illustrate that the relationship between employees' age and perceived external employability is negative across all included countries, regardless of the country's unemployment rate. However, the age-employability relationship is less strong when employees accumulated Human Resource Development Practices (HRDPs). This means that the negative age-effect is buffered by HRDPs in such a way that the more HRDPs individuals perceive, the less pronounced the age-effect becomes. This study provides some preliminary but compelling evidence regarding the broad and desirable effects of investing in the employability of older workers. The implications are potentially far-reaching, as this study suggests that employability investments can help abate challenges at both the country and organizational level associated with aging workers and losing or underutilizing the talent they possess.

In concert, the four articles in this special issue illustrate that HRM investments in employability can be the result of different views of employer responsibility, such as investing based on strategic choice, shared responsibility or corporate social responsibility. This highlights not only the diverse applicability of employability, but it also underscores the importance of contextualizing its application to specific investments in HRM policies and practices and worker populations.

### **Lessons learned**

We next discuss two especially insightful implications of the special issue papers for theory and practice. First, the employability management paradox is not a given, and second, organizational investments can indeed modify employees' employability and also benefit the organization.

#### ***Lesson 1: The employability management paradox is not a given***

The employability management paradox describes employers' concerns and reluctance to invest in employees, as doing so may improve employees' performance, but it may also make them more attractive in the external market and motivate them to seek other opportunities and leave. The return on investments in these cases is paid to competitors (De Cuyper & De Witte, 2011). However, this idea may be too simplistic. Cerdin et al. in this special issue show that employable workers perceive to have more internal career opportunities when their employer invest in training opportunities, and Rodrigues et al. likewise demonstrate that employable workers feel more attached to their employer when the latter invests in their career development. The evidence from these studies is quite convincing given that the samples of talented employees in the study by Cerdin et al. and young graduates in the study by Rodrigues et al. are both groups intuitively linked with higher job mobility.

What these studies show is that organizations can use development-related investments to signal that they care about their employees' employability and this triggers reciprocating behavior among employees (e.g. increased commitment). This provides not only an empirical contribution to the employability literature, but also a theoretical one as, up to now, arguments against the employability management paradox were predominantly based on social exchange theory: Rodrigues et al. and Cerdin et al. provide a further deepening of the social exchange mechanism by adding insights from signaling theory (Connelly, Certo, Ireland, & Reutzel, 2011). For instance, the signal that development opportunities

will be provided, reinforced by its actual delivery, creates a powerful message of the employer's commitment to the workforce which is likely to generate a positive response from employees. The study by Solberg et al. provides further support for the signaling mechanism: employees positively respond to *fulfilment* of developmental promises by showing willingness to adapt to business needs, the promise as such does not lead to reciprocating behaviour. Taken together, the special issue papers' theoretical and empirical arguments against the employability management paradox show a clear lesson for organizations as well: HRM investments in employability are more likely to lead to gain than to loss.

### ***Lesson 2: Organizational investments make workers more employable and also benefit the organization***

The four studies in this special issue provide an important contribution to the employability literature by moving empirical research away from a focus on individual factors towards including HRM investments. The papers demonstrate different means by which employers can invest in, enhance, and reap the benefits associated with employability.

First, HRM practices can boost positive effects or buffer potential risks and negative effects of employability-related perceptions and behaviors. In other words, HRM investments bolster benefits and reduce potential losses and, hence, can be considered as an important factor in enhancing mutual gain. By way of illustration of the positive effects, Cerdin et al. show that training boosts the positive relationship between dispositional employability and perceived internal career opportunities of talented workers. And Rodrigues et al. demonstrate that career development practices boost organizational commitment through increased employability. Regarding the potential risks and negative effects, Solberg et al. indicate that making promises but not delivering them may damage internal employability and commitment while Rodrigues et al. show that career development practices reduce turnover intentions through increased employability but that this is only effective among those with a protean career orientation.

Second, the studies by Rodrigues et al. and Dello Russo et al. highlight that it is the depth of HR practices that has a stronger impact on employability than single development practices. For example, in the Rodrigues et al. study, it is the *combination* of career development such as mentoring and career counselling, skill and competency development, such as training for the current job, training for other jobs and job rotation, and performance management reflected in regular appraisals and feedback rather than any one of these that makes the difference. More

generally, if development practices are supported by a broader set of HR practices, this is likely to strengthen the message of organizational commitment to employees' career development. This finding reflects a key tenet in the HRM literature that HR bundles in comparison to isolated HR practices have stronger performance effects (MacDuffie, 1995; Boxall & Macky, 2009) to matters related to employability. The implication for organizations is that they should provide an integrated set of development practices, a development 'mini-bundle', ensuring that positive synergies are created leading to a strong employability effect.

Third, the studies in this special issue, and notably the paper by Solberg et al, suggest that it is the actual experience of HRM investments that increases employees' employability rather than the kind of unfulfilled promises sometimes made to newcomers. Merely observing that HR practices exist within the organization, or receiving developmental promises without follow-up, seems not to effectively stimulate employability-related perceptions and behaviors. This could be especially important for retaining employees that are anticipating future advancement, such as talented employees and employees with high protean career orientations. Rodrigues et al., Dello Russo et al., and Cerdin et al. use experience-based measurements of HR practices (cf. Wang, Kim, Rafferty, & Sanders, 2020) and find positive relationships with employability.

Fourth, line managers seem to play an important role in the implementation of organizational investments in employability. This is not surprising as they are the most proximal and frequent organization-employee interface, and they thus play particularly important roles in representing and implementing employers' employability orientation. Although supervisor support is a well-accepted antecedent of employability in current literature (Van Harten et al., 2016), Solberg et al. show that line managers can additionally stimulate their workers' employability by fulfilling developmental promises. This finding extends general insights on the pivotal role of line managers in HRM implementation (Purcell & Hutchinson, 2007) to the employability literature. However, this implies that organizations should offer line managers adequate discretionary room so that they can realize developmental promises to their employees (Leisink & Knies, 2011). This can vary across organizations and the finding should therefore not be automatically generalized.

### **Looking ahead: recommendations for future research**

This special issue provides a first analysis of how HRM investments, in particular HR development policies and practices, affect workers'



employability-related perceptions and behaviors. Based on the findings of the included studies, it seems that HRM investments in employability can mutually benefit employers and employees. However, this needs to be further studied by including a broader scope of concepts and research populations and designs that is explicated in our following guidance for future research and practice.

First, we encourage researchers to dig deeper in the process from HRM practices to employability and subsequent outcomes. Papers in this special issue show that experienced HRM investments are effective signals that influence employability, and future studies could consequently study how this relates to HR outcomes other than commitment or turnover intentions (e.g., well-being and in-role and extra-role performance). Taking this further, it will be valuable to investigate employee reactions to not only individual human resource development practices (e.g., training) or a mini-bundle of HRDPs, but how a wider set of HR practices affecting, for example, rewards and job design, can affect employability, thereby providing a more comprehensive account of its effect.

Second, both researchers and practitioners would benefit from comparisons of different operationalizations of employability. Operationalizations used in this special issue are dispositional employability (Cerdin et al.), willingness to be internally employable (Solberg et al.), proactive career orientation (Rodrigues et al.), perceived external employability (Dello Russo et al.; Rodrigues et al.), and perceived internal career prospects (Cerdin et al., for a discussion of the different operationalizations, see Forrier, Verbruggen, & De Cuyper, 2015 and Van Harten, De Cuyper, Knies, & Forrier, 2019). Together, the four studies imply that HR investments are positive for all these different ways of looking at employability. However, while this provides fairly robust evidence, it would be helpful to flesh out which HR practices are relevant for which type of employability.

Third, future researchers are urged to broaden employee samples beyond employees with high strategic value such as talented employees (e.g., Cerdin et al. this special issue) and young graduates with high protean career orientation (e.g. Rodrigues et al., this special issue). It seems logical that HRM investments in those groups lead to potential mutual gains, but whether this assumption also holds for vulnerable workers needs to be further studied. Understanding employability implications for vulnerable workers, such as those who are older (e.g., Dello Russo et al. this special issue), non-core and with little education, would greatly extend the utility of the construct for both research and practice. Interesting research questions are whether vulnerable groups profit differently from HRM investments and from which investments exactly.

This work is necessary to understand and perhaps avoid a dilemma: is it justifiable for organizations to invest only in strategically valuable employees, as advocated, for example by Lepak and Snell (1999), or do they have a broader responsibility to all employees and larger society? The first strategy could imply and further strengthen a Matthew Effect whereby only the most valuable receive attention and those others are neglected (Forrier et al., 2018).

Fourth, the four studies in this special issue also share several methodological gaps that need to be addressed in future research. Like the larger employability domain, more longitudinal and multiple wave designs are needed in order to understand the temporal dynamism inherent in employability (as also argued for in the two-wave study by Rodrigues et al.) and the ever-changing employer-employee relationships. The implied exchange relationships would be more accurately studied and understood if employer/supervisor perspectives and data were included. Combining employee and employer views, HR policies, and HR reactions would help validate the one side of the exchange in light of the other. Among other points of interest, this would enable researchers to separate perception from action, and link HR policies and practices to employees' employability related outcomes. This is important as there could be a discrepancy between what is offered by the organization and what is perceived by employees. There is also a challenge to distinguish the impact of employability-related HRM investments from other HR activity. We encourage employability scholars to apply insights from HR attribution theory (Nishii, Lepak & Schneider, 2008) to assess employees' attributions for *why* HR practices exist, and whether and how this further impacts employability and its outcomes. In doing so, a new employability attribution should be developed that asks for employees' interpretations of management's intent to enhance employability development in implementing HR practices, as current attributions focus on other or broader purposes such as enhancing service quality or employee well-being. Finally, multilevel research designs could help in better assessing the organizational benefits of employability investments, as until now employability outcomes are predominantly measured at the individual/employee level. For example, the assumption that employees' employability enhances organizational flexibility could be further studied by measuring innovative behaviour at a team level or by using organizational data on job promotions and turnover. In summary, there is a rich research agenda on the topic of employability addressing the determinants of its effectiveness, its influence on workers and the role of organizational policy and practice on employability outcomes.

## Disclosure statement

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