

# Managing Employees' Employability

## Employer and Employee Perspectives

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### 15.1 Introduction

Employees' employability has mostly been viewed and hence studied as an issue for business organizations or as a general concern (e.g. Forrier and Sels 2003; Nauta et al. 2009; Van Dam 2004). Businesses are confronted with global changes that challenge their ability to compete and require them to have an employable workforce that has up-to-date skills and can be flexibly deployed. Only a few studies have examined the importance and features of employees' employability in public organizations (e.g. De Cuyper and De Witte 2011; Van Harten 2016). Nevertheless, there are specific reasons that make employees' employability an important issue for the public sector, and likewise, there exist an increasing number of examples of public sector organizations instigating employability policies.

Besides the general developments that initiate organizational changes (e.g. globalization, technological progress and innovation, and demographic trends), new public management (NPM) has come to play a central role in the public sector in recent decades, with values such as efficiency and effectiveness being emphasized (Boyne et al. 2006; Osborne and Gaebler 1992; Pollitt and Bouckaert 2004). Due to this business-oriented approach, strengthened by the economic crisis, many government organizations have adopted austerity measures and made changes to their organizational structures (Bozeman 2010; Pandey 2010; Raudla et al. 2013; see also Chapter 11). At the same time, civil servants face new public service demands coming from an increasingly demanding society. Taken together, these changes call for employable public sector workers, meaning that they need to adopt new roles and acquire new skills (OECD 2017c).

The relevance of investing in workers' employability in the public sector could, furthermore, be justified using the concept of public value and by seeing investments in employability as a retention strategy. Retaining employable workers enables organizations to meet fluctuating demands for new products and services (Nauta et al. 2009). Employability provides a means for employers to match labor supply with demand in a changing environment (Thijssen et al. 2008). For generations of

employees, lifetime *employment* with the same employer was considered the norm. Today, lifetime *employability* is emphasized (Thijssen et al. 2008). In an environment which no longer readily offers long-term employment, a key goal for employees is to maintain and enhance their opportunities in the labor market—hence the term “employability” (Rothwell and Arnold 2007; Thijssen et al. 2008). In this respect, the HRM policies of public employers that enable their employees to strengthen their employability could be regarded as creating public value. It should be noted that the public sector labor market, specifically central government, has traditionally been different from that in the private sphere and that the dominant practice in many countries is still lifetime employment (Bordogna and Bach 2016). As a consequence, many public organizations in Western countries have more elderly workforces than seen in the private sector, which leads to employability issues specifically related to older workers.

In this chapter, based on important publications and recent research findings in the employability literature, we provide an overview of public sector workers’ employability and particularly zoom in on research and examples from practice in public sector contexts. In Section 15.2, we outline perspectives on and definitions of employability in both research and practice. We then discuss findings from empirical research on employability outcomes, followed by an outline of the determinants of employability. We end this chapter with conclusions and propose future research and policy agendas.

## 15.2 Employability in Research and Practice

The concept of employability has been in the spotlight of empirical researchers since the late-1990s (Forrier and Sels 2003) when awareness grew that careers were becoming less stable and predictable and that individuals would need to adapt to constant changes in order to survive in the labor market (Van der Heijde and Van der Heijden 2006). Research attention continues to grow: Our Web of Science search for articles on employability published in the last decade yielded more than 400 articles, and while we found nineteen articles in 2008, we found sixty-one articles in 2017. The articles were spread over sixty-nine themes in Web of Science, with “education/educational research” and “psychology applied” being the largest themes with slightly over 100 articles in each. The theme “public administration” was ranked thirteenth with twelve articles. However, this does not imply that employability is little studied in the public sector as we also found some articles with the public sector as the research setting in the first two categories. Nevertheless, only a few studies have examined the importance and specific features of employees’ employability in public organizations.

In essence, being employable means being able to survive or having reasonable job chances in the labor market (Forrier et al. 2015; Thijssen et al. 2008). However, research definitions and measurements of the concept are plentiful, making it a somewhat scattered field. Therefore, in Section 15.2.1, we first provide a generic

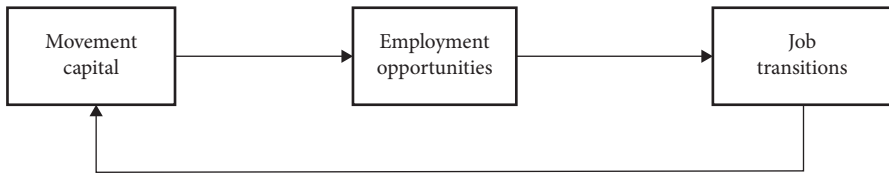
overview of the employability notions that are used in research. We then discuss transnational and national policy discourses on employability and give attention to the public personnel policy field.

### 15.2.1 Employability in Research

In the last decade, employability has been increasingly studied from an individual perspective, meaning that employability is regarded as the individual's opportunities in the internal and/or external labor markets (Forrier et al. 2015). However, there are also literature streams that regard employability from societal and organizational perspectives. Within the societal perspective, employability is seen as the ability of different categories of the labor force to gain employment, and a country's employment rates are usually regarded as the indicator of employability (Thijssen et al. 2008). From an organizational perspective, employability concerns the ability to match labor supply and demand, often in a changing organizational environment. In this respect, employability is linked to an organization's functional flexibility (Thijssen et al. 2008). Investments in human capital or training are regarded as an indicator of the level of organizational employability. In this chapter, we predominantly (but not exclusively) make use of studies on the employability of individuals (usually employees) since these provide the most recent empirical insights based on an accessible range of employability concepts and measures.

There are quite a few differences in the way in which researchers conceptualize and measure the basic definition of workers' employability as an individual's likelihood or possibility of a job. Forrier et al. (2015) grouped these approaches into three categories. First, one group of researchers understand employability as an individual's range of abilities and attitudes (personal strengths) necessary to acquire a job. This is also referred to as movement capital (Forrier et al. 2009). Examples of employability variables in this category are employability competences (Van der Heijde and Van der Heijden 2006), up-to-date expertise (Van Harten et al. 2016), and a willingness to develop and change (Van Dam 2004). Second, employability is sometimes regarded as the individual's appraisal of available employment opportunities; in other words, their self-perceived job chances. Researchers may distinguish between internal and external job chances (e.g. Rothwell and Arnold 2007) or include an appraisal of chances of any job (quantitative appraisal) or a better job (qualitative appraisal) (e.g. De Cuyper and De Witte 2011). A third and less common notion of employability addresses the realization of personal strengths and job chances, which is most noticeable when transitioning between jobs (e.g. Raemdonck et al. 2012). It is often assumed that these different notions of employability are interrelated.

Movement capital allows and motivates individuals to increase their "employability radius" (Thijssen et al. 2008), making it likely that individuals' perceptions of their employment opportunities are also boosted. Based on the idea that perceptions drive behavior, these perceptions could consequently lead to individuals changing jobs (Forrier et al. 2015). Such job transitions could then feed back to movement



**Figure 15.1** Dynamic chain of employability notions

Source: Based on Forrier et al. (2015).

capital by, for instance, increasing self-awareness and self-efficacy and acting as a strong signal of one's abilities (Nelissen et al. 2017). As such, a dynamic chain of employability is predicted (Forrier et al. 2009) as visualized in Figure 15.1. Various studies provide empirical evidence for the relationships although further research is needed (see Forrier et al. 2015).

The employability notions so far described involve general definitions that could be applied in a variety of organizational settings. We are unaware of any public sector-specific definitions for employability. General employability concepts are used and tested in public or semi-public organizations, such as schools (Veld et al. 2015), hospitals (Van Harten et al. 2016), and municipalities (Van Emmerik et al. 2012). Further, employability has been studied in a range of countries, such as Australia (Clarke 2008), Great Britain (Rothwell and Arnold 2007), the Scandinavian countries (Kirves et al. 2014), the Benelux countries (De Cuyper and De Witte 2011; Van Harten et al. 2016), and the US (Fugate and Kinicki 2008). Based on existing findings, employability is arguably relevant for employees in general (we elaborate further on this in Section 15.3), but comparative research across sectors and countries that would support this claim is largely lacking.

## 15.2.2 Employability Policy Discourses

Over the last decade, employability has increasingly become an issue of national and transnational concern. For example, China, when president of the G20 in 2016, introduced the topic of “innovation: decent work, enhanced employability, and adequate job opportunities (IDEA)” in the G20 Employment Working Group (OECD et al. 2016). Alongside demographic changes that have contributed to this growing interest in employability in Western countries (Clarke 2008), a recent joint publication by the OECD, the International Labour Organization (ILO), the World Bank, and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) (OECD et al. 2016) observed that developments, such as the speed and nature of globalization, technological changes, and changes in the organization of work, add to the necessity of paying attention to the employability of citizens. Although such trends involve different facets across G20 countries, generally speaking, they affect what kind of work needs to be done, by whom, where, and how it is carried out.

Similarly, the importance of the continuous skill development of citizens is widely acknowledged, and transnational organizations urge governments to move away from skill development policies that prepare for lifelong employment toward achieving lifetime employability (OECD et al. 2016). This focus on skill or human capital development is reflected in the employability discourse in many OECD countries such as the UK, which tries to stimulate employability through education and apprenticeships (OECD 2017b), and France, where employers play an important role in lifelong learning (OECD 2017a). In the Netherlands, explicitly the shared responsibility of employers and employees for enhancing employability (Stichting van de Arbeid 2013) is recognized, meaning that employees have to become more autonomous and resilient when it comes to their careers, while employers are expected to support rather than control their employees' development. According to a discourse analysis by Fejes (2010), there is a transnational consensus on the shared responsibility of the individual, state, and employer in policies concerning labor markets and lifelong learning. However, in countries such as the US where ideas about adaptability and flexibility have a key role in the debate, the individual is primarily held responsible for their own employability. Fejes (2010) particularly focused on the Swedish national discourse and found that the municipality and state, rather than the individual, are construed as being primarily responsible for employability, especially when it relates to public services such as healthcare where shortages of skilled workers are expected.

In short, employability is on the agenda of many OECD countries although they vary in how to enhance employability—to an extent because there are different notions as to which actors are responsible for enhancing employability. Although the OECD (2017a and 2017b) has found employability enhancement policies to be present in many countries, there is also critique of such policies. For example, Bowman et al. (2017) saw a “work-first” policy dominance in many OECD countries. They saw such policies as being primarily targeted at avoiding unemployment at all times, resulting in moving people into jobs as quickly as possible, and criticized this for its short-term focus that could lead to new skill imbalances in the near future.

Employability discourses focus on employability in general, and it is unclear whether there is a specific discourse on employability in the public sector that is different from the private sector. That is, employability appears as a general concern both in research and in practice. However, the OECD (2017c) recently published a report on the need to develop the employability of civil servants. Civil servants face new public service demands coming from an increasingly demanding society. They also have to deal with growing complexity in their work as, for instance, systems and tools of governance are increasingly digital and open. It is argued that to keep pace, civil servants should develop communicative and co-creating skills to engage with citizens and collaborative skills to work in networked organizations. These required changes are reflected in a plan by the UK government that aims to achieve a fully skilled and up-to-date civil service workforce by 2020 (see Box 15.1). Countries also increasingly acknowledge that demographic trends and constant technological

### **Box 15.1. The UK's Civil Service Workforce Plan, 2016–2020**

In 2016, the UK government launched a workforce plan aiming to develop a civil service that is able to proactively adapt to the changing world of work. Part of the plan's strategy is to improve the commercial capability of the civil service and ensure that it becomes a world leader in terms of digital transformation. The UK government intends to achieve this by, in part, implementing a better recruitment and selection process that heavily focuses on the provision of apprenticeships (the aim is to deliver at least 30,000 civil service apprenticeships over the course of Parliament) and traineeships (e.g. the Civil Service Fast Stream that offers fifteen different programs).

Furthermore, although professional development programs already existed within the civil service, the government is aiming to develop clear career paths for core professions, with structured opportunities for learning and development that are linked to the career paths and with competencies and experience used to assess readiness for promotion. This is also intended to retain civil servants and show them that they can build a career within the civil service.

The National Audit Office (NAO) examined the UK government's approach to identifying and closing capability gaps in the civil service and concluded that the plans were not keeping pace with the growing challenges facing civil services. The initiatives outlined above were, for instance, considered as needing time to mature, and the NAO recommended government should develop a more sophisticated understanding of its capability needs within and across departments, for instance, by annual workforce planning and assessing the capability needs of significant projects before implementing solutions.

*Sources:* Cabinet Office and Civil Service 2016 and Morse 2017.

changes lead to a need to reallocate human resources across sectors, including healthcare, education, and social sectors (OECD 2017c). Public service workforces in Western countries age more rapidly than the rest of society. According to Truss (2013), this is linked to public sector employees tending to stay longer with their employers. An aging workforce in combination with a growing demand for labor, as is currently happening in healthcare organizations, presents challenges for public employers on how to attract and retain employable employees. In Section 15.4, we provide examples of employability investments made by public sector employers.

## **15.3 Employability Outcomes**

The employability discourse regards employability as an important asset for individuals to survive in the labor market and argues that employable workers could also be

valuable to organizations, since they are increasingly confronted with changing circumstances that impact on the nature and organization of work. Reflecting this, research has started to examine the outcomes of employability during the last decade. In this section, we outline research findings on employability outcomes from the perspectives of individual workers and their employers. As noted earlier, employability research has adopted a general perspective with little attention given to the specificity of the public sector context. Therefore, at the end of this section, we evaluate research on employability outcomes from a public sector perspective.

Research indicates that employability leads to employees' career success and better psychological well-being. Several studies have found that employable workers experience greater career success in terms of higher salaries and promotion opportunities when compared to less employable individuals (Kiong and Yin-Fah 2016; Van der Heijden et al. 2009). Further, employability decreases feelings of job insecurity (De Cuyper et al. 2012; McArdle et al. 2007). Researchers explain this finding by arguing that employable individuals feel in control of their careers and able to deal with challenges resulting from changes and uncertainty: They have the resources to deal with such circumstances. This results in them experiencing less stress and feeling better than less employable workers. In line with this reasoning, there are various studies, including longitudinal research, showing that employability positively affects well-being as, for instance, measured using variables such as general perceptions of well-being (Berntson and Marklund 2007), feelings of strain or burn-out (De Cuyper et al. 2012; Drenzo et al. 2015), and work-life balance satisfaction (Van Harten 2016). Other forms such as physical and social well-being (see Chapter 12) tend not to be linked to employability in research so far. Interestingly, studies generally theorize and empirically seek to demonstrate that employability has positive effects on well-being, while the possibility of negative well-being effects is rarely explored. The latter seem plausible since, for instance, stress reactions or decreased job satisfaction could develop when individuals experience pressure to constantly work on their employability, which could require individuals to invest significant amounts of their time that could then lead to a work-life imbalance. Even if, when regarded as an isolated concept, employability does not have negative well-being effects, there could be negative effects that depend on an employee's job and personal context.

Further, it has been shown that employability also has outcomes that are important from an organizational perspective. Employability has been found to impact on organizational commitment, turnover intentions, and job performance. De Cuyper and De Witte (2011) found that employees who perceive themselves as having employment opportunities within their organization (labeled as internal employability) are more committed to their organization. Only when they perceive *better* job chances elsewhere (external employability) do they become less committed to their employer. The latter finding has been corroborated by Philippaers et al. (2016). Dries et al. (2014) have shown that employees who find themselves employable in terms of, for instance, being flexible and adaptable do not have a greater intention to leave their organization than less employable workers. Furthermore, De Cuyper and

De Witte (2011) found a positive indirect effect of internal employability on job performance through increased commitment. The positive link between employability and performance has been demonstrated elsewhere. For instance, Camps and Torres (2011) showed that employability was positively related to individual task performance, and Stoffers et al. (2018) found a positive association with innovative work behavior. Van Harten (2016) found a positive relationship between the up-to-date expertise component of employability and job performance. It should be noted that the above-mentioned studies on the employability–performance link all use employees’ self-perceptions of performance and do not use other performance measures or sources. There is also a study showing negative effects of external employability on self-rated job performance (Philippaers et al. 2016).

Overall, most of the research points to positive employability effects that benefit employers. This goes against the so-called employability management paradox that organizations face when investing in employability: Employers are afraid that as a result of increased employability, employees will start looking for another job and leave the organization (De Cuyper and De Witte 2011). In other words, organizations might make investments from which their competitors reap the benefits. Although the above research findings downplay this fear, there are instances in which increased turnover does occur. When employees perceive few promotion opportunities in their organization and/or perceive better jobs elsewhere, increased employability feelings boost turnover (Nelissen et al. 2017). Although a certain level of turnover maintains organizational flexibility, too much turnover could involve risks linked to organizational amnesia if vital knowledge disappears along with employees. This can result in decreased performance, less organizational learning, and increased vulnerability (Pollitt 2000).

Only a few studies have examined employability outcomes in a public or semi-public sector context. For instance, De Cuyper and De Witte (2011) looked at teachers in several schools in Belgium, while Camps and Torres (2011) researched the academic staff of universities in Costa Rica, and Van Harten (2016) studied hospital employees in the Netherlands. These studies all found positive effects of employability on self-rated performance measures, which suggests that employability also has merit for public service performance. However, this claim should be studied further by relating employability to other performance indicators, such as service quality or client satisfaction that are also relevant in a public sector setting (cf. Chapter 2). Further, theory and research are needed on the ways in which factors that are specific to the public sector are likely to impact the outcomes of employability. To date, employability studies that use data from multiple sectors have not investigated possible sectoral differences. At best, researchers have included such differences as control variables in their analyses while not reflecting on contextual or institutional factors that might explain employability outcomes. Insights from public administration research could provide input to investigate this idea. For example, based on research demonstrating the negative effects of red tape (e.g. DeHart-Davis and Pandey 2005), it can be hypothesized that red tape moderates the relationships between employability



and its outcomes in a public sector context. Employees' experiences of red tape, which is more prevalent in public than in private sector organizations (cf. Chapter 12), could hinder performance effects or further stimulate the turnover of employable individuals who perceive better job chances elsewhere.

To summarize, research on employability outcomes indicates that employability is indeed a valuable asset—for both individuals and organizations. The extent to which employability also contributes to public service performance and how these effects are dependent on specific characteristics of the public sector need to be studied further.

## 15.4 Determinants of Employees' Employability

Knowing that employability has benefits, it is useful to gain knowledge of its determinants. A broad range of factors have been found to impact employability, and a recent review by Guilbert et al. (2016) reduced these to three groups of factors: (1) individual characteristics; (2) organizational strategies; and (3) governmental and educational factors.

The first group of determinants can be further divided into three groups (Guilbert et al. 2016): (1) sociodemographic attributes, e.g. age (Lu 2011); (2) interpersonal attributes, e.g. quality of social network (Cheung et al. 2018); and (3) psychological attributes, e.g. self-efficacy (Bargsted 2017). Although these factors are all somehow tied to the individual, their nature ranges from fairly static factors that cannot be easily changed (if at all), such as age, gender, and family situation, to factors that are more dynamic and that can be influenced, such as self-esteem and quality of one's social network. We note that recent studies especially provide empirical evidence for the impact of psychological attributes on employability. Wille et al. (2013) conducted a fifteen-year longitudinal study on perceived employability (referring to perceived job chances) and found that the Big Five traits had substantial effects, even after controlling for a number of demographic and career-related characteristics. Further, Nauta et al. (2010) showed that role breadth self-efficacy of employees in the health-care and welfare sector significantly influences employees' employability orientation (similar to a readiness to develop and adapt), and Kim et al. (2015) showed that organization-based self-esteem is related to perceived employability.

In addition to these psychological attributes, the demographic attribute of age is increasingly studied, but research findings here are mixed. It has been shown that older people gain greater job security in their current job (internal employability) through an increase in experience/expertise but less easily find work elsewhere (external employability) (De Lange et al. 2006; Nauta et al. 2010). This is a particularly relevant finding for the public sector since public service workforces in Western countries tend to age more rapidly than the rest of society. We would argue that public service motivation (PSM) (see Chapter 14) could be another individual determinant of public sector employees' employability as, for instance, the motivation to

deliver public service value might negatively influence employees' willingness to change work contexts and their perceptions of job opportunities outside their organization (i.e. it could influence at least two distinct employability variables). To the best of our knowledge, there are no studies examining the relationship between PSM and employability, indicating an area where further research is necessary to show whether and how the concepts are related.

The second group of determinants addresses organizational strategies aimed at stimulating employability. It is often argued that organizations have the responsibility to offer employees the support and facilities necessary to enhance their employability (Forrier and Sels 2003; Thijssen et al. 2008). Although it is recognized that employers are sometimes afraid of offering support to their employees to increase their employability in case they then start looking for another job and leave the organization (see Section 15.3), various studies indicate that a social exchange mechanism comes into play, resulting in employees having a strong intention to remain with their employer provided that they perceive internal employability or development opportunities (e.g. De Cuyper and De Witte 2011; Nauta et al. 2009). More specifically, Nauta et al. (2009) showed that the presence of a strong employability culture—defined as the standards, values, and behavioral patterns that are shared in an organization to encourage employees to focus on their personal development—stimulates employability while simultaneously decreasing turnover intentions. Further, HR policies and practices that reflect and accompany an employability culture are found to boost employability. For instance, formal training and job rotation programs stimulate employability (Fleischmann et al. 2015), employee participation in competency development initiatives is positively associated with workers' perceptions of employability (De Vos et al. 2011), and employees whose jobs provide more resources, such as autonomy and feedback, perceive more job opportunities and subsequently perceive greater employability (Van Emmerik et al. 2012). There are very few studies on how organizational strategies specifically impact on public sector workers' employability. It could be that public sector characteristics, such as an aging workforce and the salience of PSM, require employability policies and practices that are specific to the public sector, but research offers few clues. To provide an illustration of approaches, we present a specific employability policy in the Dutch national government in Box 15.2.

An important actor in the implementation and successful adaptation of HR policies, as also seen in Box 15.2, is the line manager (see Chapter 3). Similarly, employability research shows that it is vital that managers accept their role responsibilities in the implementation of employability practices (Van Dam 2004; Van der Heijden and Bakker 2011; Van Harten et al. 2016). More specifically, the degree to which managers identify with the employability goals as well as their awareness, willingness, and capability to perform their new role in supporting their employees' employability is important (Peters and Lam 2015).

The third group of employability determinants according to Guilbert et al. (2016) concerns governmental and educational policies. We expand this to include contextual

### **Box 15.2. The 3–5–7 model within the Dutch national government**

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The 3–5–7 model is an instrument aimed at stimulating the mobility and sustainable employability of civil servants within central government. It can be explained as follows:

- *0–3 years in a position:* Employees should focus on the full and qualitative performance of the tasks within the job description. In addition, employees engage in personal development for their further career opportunities.
- *3–5 years in a position:* Employees should be orientated toward their next career step. This means that employees should examine their wishes for their next workplace and what steps need to be taken to get there. This could already result in a new workplace.
- *5–7 years in a position:* If an employee has not yet taken a career step after five years, the employee and their manager should determine, as concretely as possible, what steps are needed to find a new position. In this period, customized agreements between employee and manager are made to realize the next career step, which the employee is to realize after seven years of working in the same job.

In this model, career steps can be horizontal or vertical and inside or outside the organization but usually remaining within government. This can mean a new job at another unit or even a different department/ministry.

This model was in use during the Balkenende IV Cabinet (2007–2010). There were some differences between departments in implementing this model. For instance, the Dutch Department of Health, Welfare, and Sport did not view the model as a compulsory framework in personnel management. Rather, they regarded it as a framework that employees could use when thinking about their career and personal development. With such an implementation, the success of the 3–5–7 model relied on cooperation between employees and managers. Here, the model had no legal consequences for employees with permanent employment, and participation was voluntary. However, the department introduced several practices that pressured employees to regularly think and discuss their mobility: (1) role models from the top management level started a conversation about their function retention time; and (2) the model was included in HR practices as a standard topic in the annual performance appraisal and as part of strategic HR planning.

*Source:* Ministry of the Interior and Kingdom Relations n.d.

conditions such as a country's macroeconomic situation. Although it is recognized that contextual conditions impact employability (Thijssen et al. 2008), there is less empirical evidence available than for the other two categories. McQuaid and Lindsay (2005), Duff et al. (2007), Lindsay and Mailand (2009), and Sing (2012) have all studied the measures taken by governments to achieve full employment, and they propose strategies designed to enhance the employability of different worker populations (e.g. the unemployed, youths in difficulty, minorities, and people with a disability). These might, for instance, involve adopting incentives or constraining measures to promote lifelong learning. However, significant differences exist between countries, making any attempt at generalization about these strategies and measures difficult (Guilbert et al. 2016). In addition, several studies on employability fail to give explicit attention to the public versus private contexts. In many studies, public and private employees are simply merged in the sample (e.g. De Battisti et al. 2016; Ngo et al. 2017; Pinto and Ramalheira 2017). A notable exception is De Grip et al. (2004), who argue that the employability of workers in a given sector or industry partly depends on the extent to which employees need to cope with developments (technological, demographic, economic, and organizational) in their particular sector. Their study, conducted in the Netherlands, showed that technological developments and demographic developments (workforce aging) clearly play an important role in the civil service, police, defense, and education services and that these sectors had some of the greatest needs for employability at the time of data collection.

In this section, we have provided a broad overview of the determinants of employability. What we know little about is how determinants on different levels (individual, organizational, and societal) relate to each other and influence each other in determining employees' employability (Van Harten et al. 2020). It is quite conceivable that the three levels complement each other. For example, it is plausible that an organization's employability policy works better when it takes account of important individual employee characteristics that influence employability. In addition, it is plausible that activities by an organization to increase its employees' employability are more effective, in the sense that employees are more inclined to develop and adapt when a country has a social safety net (such as with the flexicurity model in Denmark). Comparative research that examines the impact of factors across sectors is lacking, meaning that, for instance, we do not know whether contextual conditions have a greater impact on public or private sector workers' employability, or whether public sector employers provide more or different types of employability investments than private sector employers. On that note, it is worth mentioning that most studies that focus on individual level determinants are published in general management journals, while research on the impact of contextual conditions tends to appear in public sector journals (e.g. Kemp and Davidson 2010; Lindsay and Dutton 2012; Lindsay et al. 2008). This is not to suggest that contextual determinants are relevant only for public sector employers and workers, but clearly, further research attention is required.

## 15.5 Conclusion

This chapter has examined the issue of public sector workers' employability by analyzing research and examples taken from practice. We have demonstrated that both in research and in practice, the concept, including its determinants and outcomes, is predominantly treated in a generic, non-sector-specific way. A possible explanation for this generic approach is that the employability research field is still in its early days: It is only in the last decade that research attention has been growing significantly, and the field needs to further evolve. Furthermore, the field is dominated by researchers coming from educational sciences and psychology backgrounds who approach employability using an individual, micro-level perspective. This results in methodologically rigorous research but at the expense of attention to contextual (institutional) influences and differences.

To further develop the field, we believe that research would benefit from contextualization, which has also recently been called for by Forrier et al. (2018, 6) who argue that "employability is context dependent because it is shaped along common appraisals that are embedded in a specific space and time." We therefore call for comparative employability research across countries or sectors and for public sector-specific studies. One could perhaps have expected there to be more interest in public sector organizations or in public-private comparisons because semi-public and fully public organizations have been confronted with demographic developments, sometimes to an even greater extent than private organizations, and with public management reforms that urge greater employability. Further, since employee well-being is (or at least used to be) an important goal of public sector personnel policies, one would expect employability to be a key concern nowadays.

Although employability determinants have been extensively mapped, with considerable differences between the categories of determinants, and the evidence for employability outcomes is growing, there is no evidence on how public sector characteristics might influence or interfere with the identified relationships. For instance, in this chapter, we have hypothesized on the possibly hindering roles of red tape and PSM that require research. Further, since the evidence for the positive performance effects of employability is based solely on self-rated job performance, research is needed that examines the impact of employability on other types of performance indicators, such as service quality or client satisfaction. These indicators would provide meaningful operationalizations of public service performance (see also Chapter 2) and contribute to the contextualization of the employability concept.

Finally, when it comes to managing employability, we would argue that a fit between initiatives on the different levels (individual, organizational, and societal) is a prerequisite for achieving employability aims. This, among others, means that public sector employers need to consider the composition of the workforce and the characteristics and needs of their individual employees when developing employability policies and practices. For instance, noting that older workers usually rate

their own employability lower when compared to their younger counterparts (e.g. Van Harten 2016), public organizations with a relatively large proportion of older workers could try to give an extra stimulus to their older workers' employability by providing them with training programs on how to best select and use skills and tasks that fit their abilities and interests (Truxillo et al. 2015). Furthermore, public sector organizations should pay attention to the specific labor market challenges facing civil services. For example, promoting external employability may not be desirable where there is a tight labor market, such as in education and care, as this could jeopardize the provision of these public services. Rather, it would seem more effective to invest in internal employability opportunities, such as the 3–5–7 model as employed by the Dutch government (see Box 15.2), and create resourceful and challenging jobs that match public employees' needs. However, as described in this chapter, more research is needed on the features of employability in a public sector setting that could ultimately lead to evidence-based and concrete interventions for managing the employability of public sector workers.

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