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Toward a contextualized perspective of employability development

Jos Akkermans ^a, Pascale Le Blanc ^b, Beatrice Van der Heijden ^{c,d,e,f,g} and Ans De Vos ^{h,i}

^aSchool of Business and Economics Department of Management and Organization, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam (VU), Amsterdam, Netherlands; ^bHuman Performance Management Group Department of Industrial Engineering and Innovation Sciences, Eindhoven University of Technology, Eindhoven, Netherlands; ^cInstitute for Management Research, Radboud University, Nijmegen, Netherlands; ^dFaculty of Management, Open Universiteit, Heerlen, Netherlands; ^eResearch Group HRM and Organizational Behavior, Ghent University, Ghent, Belgium; ^fSchool of Business, Hubei University, Wuhan, China; ^gKingston Business School, Kingston University, London, UK; ^hAntwerp Management School, Antwerpen, Belgium; ⁱFaculty of Business and Economics Department of Management, University of Antwerp, Antwerp, Belgium

ABSTRACT

In this article, we discuss two critical challenges in employability research. First, we argue that more research is needed to capture the dynamic nature of employability development. Although theories in this area typically incorporate temporal elements, these are rarely studied in empirical work. Second, employability research must capture the contextual nature of employability more fully, as research thus far has predominantly framed employability as an individual agentic phenomenon. Based on these two crucial challenges, we then introduce the special issue entitled “Toward a contextualized perspective of employability development,” which contains six studies that all contribute to taking up these challenges. Based on various methodologies – including conceptual, quantitative, and qualitative – these articles, together, offer a meaningful contribution to developing employability research further. We conclude this editorial by formulating an agenda for future research based on the insights offered in this special issue.

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Introduction

Although research on employability has been around since the 1950s (Feintuch, 1955), when studies primarily focused on its value for getting unemployed people placed back into work, it has seen a surge of scholarly interest since the 2010s (Van Harten et al., 2022). Typically defined as someone’s employment potential in the internal and external labour market (Forrier & Sels, 2003), employability is considered a new form of employment security in a time when careers are becoming longer, more flexible, and are often no longer characterized by lifetime employment (Fugate et al., 2021). Indeed, scholars have argued that employability is a critical resource for successful career transitions across the lifespan (De Vos et al., 2021), starting at the school-to-work transition (Blokke et al., 2023) and up to (and after) retirement (Sullivan & Al Ariss, 2019). Hence, it is abundantly clear that employability is now more relevant than ever for workers in order to develop a successful and sustainable career (De Vos et al., 2020; Le Blanc et al., 2017; Van der Heijden et al., 2020).

Recent literature reviews have offered important insights into the theoretical, conceptual, and methodological development of employability research. First, in their narrative review, Forrier et al. (2018) observed three core assumptions and accompanying blind spots. Specifically, they found that employability research typically assumes that (1) employability is a purely individual asset (whereas it is contextual), (2) employability is a result of independent and “free” agentic behaviour (whereas it is relational), and (3) employability generates positive outcomes for all (whereas it can be polarizing).

Second, Fugate et al.’s (2021) systematic literature review uncovered six main research themes: (1) employability as a resource for coping with insecurity, (2) employee benefits of employability, (3) employer benefits and risks of employability, (4) individual and contextual antecedents of employability, (5) initiatives and practices to enhance employability, and (6) employability at the macro level. In line with Forrier et al.’s (2018) conclusions, their review showed that there has been a clear emphasis on research at the individual employee level, focusing on employability as an individual asset. Third, Van Harten et al.’s (2022) systematic literature review showed three dominant lines of inquiry in employability research: (1) personal strengths (e.g., employability competencies, see, e.g., Van der Heijde & Van der Heijden, 2006), (2) employability perceptions (see, e.g., Vanhercke et al., 2014), and (3) realized employment potential (e.g., actual job changes and career transitions, see, e.g., Forrier et al., 2015). Similar to the aforementioned two reviews by Forrier et al. (2018) and Fugate et al. (2021), Van Harten et al. concluded that the first two strands, focusing on individual competencies and perceptions, have received by far the most research attention.

The steep increase in empirical research and the above-mentioned review articles offering critical reflections and ways forward signal that employability research is growing into a more mature scholarly field. As a result, although some questions have been answered by now, other questions are emerging that can consolidate the field’s growth and offer exciting new directions to enhance our understanding of the employability concept further. As with any rapidly developing

scholarly field, employability research faces several crucial challenges. Broadly speaking, it has been critiqued for being atheoretical and conceptually and methodologically “fuzzy” (De Vos et al., 2021; Forrier et al., 2018; Van Harten et al., 2022). To illustrate, Forrier et al. (2018) observed that empirical studies often use theories only as an ad hoc means for explaining research findings instead of an a priori framework for developing hypotheses and designing empirical studies. Furthermore, Van Harten et al. (2022) concluded that scholars have used a plethora of different conceptualizations and measurements in their employability research, making it difficult to consolidate findings and disseminate research insights (see also Fugate et al., 2021).

Two specific challenges that stand out across the recent overview articles in employability research are the lack of solid theorizing, conceptualizing, and measuring of, first, the *dynamic* and, second, the *contextualized* nature of employability. Therefore, in this article – and the special issue connected to it – we focus on these two critical challenges that must be resolved for employability research to advance.

Challenge 1: Capturing the dynamic nature of employability

Employability research has gained significant momentum in the field of Career Studies. A career is typically seen as the evolving sequence of work-related experiences over time (Arthur et al., 1989), in which employability should function as an employment security mechanism supporting career transitions across the lifespan (De Vos et al., 2021). Furthermore, another field heavily involved in employability research is Work and Organizational (or Industrial and Occupational) Psychology, a research domain that has produced many valuable insights related to a lifespan perspective on work and careers (e.g., Baltes et al., 1999; Carstensen, 2006; Heckhausen et al., 2010). Given these research fields’ emphasis on temporal perspectives in studying these phenomena, it is surprising that employability research has mostly neglected to follow suit. From a theoretical perspective, employability research has mainly focused on human capital, conservation of resources, and social exchange theory (Forrier et al., 2018; Fugate et al., 2021). Though these theories incorporate a temporal element (e.g., capital accumulation, resource caravans, exchange processes), these assumed dynamic processes are rarely, if ever, studied in full. Indeed, Van Harten et al.’s (2022) review showed that longitudinal study designs are still rare in employability research. Conceptually speaking, it is unclear how dynamic employability actually is and what factors could predict changes in employability across the lifespan or due to contextual changes (e.g., in one’s occupation, organization, or the broader labour market). Empirical evidence thus far is mixed, with most studies finding that although employability is, to a certain degree, dynamic, it seems to be relatively stable over time (e.g., Grosemans et al., 2023; Kirves et al., 2014). However, so far, research has not yet offered clear answers about, for example, what might trigger employability changes, whether these are mainly due to internal processes or external factors, and how fast or slow such changes may occur.

Hence, it is crucial that research in this area sheds more light on the dynamic nature of employability. For example, it is important to fully leverage the mechanisms proposed in some of the most popular theories used in employability research, such as conservation of resources theory (Hobfoll et al., 2018) and social exchange theory (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). Moreover, researchers should broaden their selection of theoretical frameworks to study employability, using career and psychological theories that incorporate dynamic elements, such as career transitions (De Vos et al., 2021; Sullivan & Al Ariss, 2021) and lifespan developmental approaches (Baltes et al., 1999; Carstensen, 2006; Heckhausen et al., 2010). Conceptually and methodologically speaking, it is critical to use a variety of between-person and within-person methods to shed light on the (predictors of) changes in employability over time.

Challenge 2: Capturing the contextualized nature of employability

Originally, employability research was mainly conducted at the macro level to study, for instance, the role of public policy in employment rates (De Vos et al., 2021). Indeed, although individual agentic perspectives dominate recent scholarly work on employability (Forrier et al., 2018), other streams, including labour economics and HRM, have offered insights about (un)employment rates, public policies, and organizational practices (Fugate et al., 2021). In addition, although rarely connected to worker employability research (Akkermans et al., 2023), educational research features a vast literature on graduate employability that sheds light on how educational institutions can develop students’ and graduates’ employability (e.g., Clarke, 2018; Healy et al., 2022). Hence, there is potential to learn from these fields to advance employability research, particularly with respect to its contextualization.

Some recent studies have offered meaningful insights into what a more contextualized view of employability could look like. For example, Fugate et al. (2021), building on the classic HR architecture model by Lepak and Snell (1999), developed a strategic employability architecture. Their model conceptualizes employability in a quadrant, based on the uniqueness and competitiveness of someone’s employability capital for an employer. To illustrate, Fugate et al. argued that highly unique and competitive employability capital will lead to a commitment employability mode that serves as a win-win for both employers and employees. Their model thereby offers a contextualized view of employability, in which the value of employability is determined by both employer and employee. Another example is Delva et al.’s (2021) conceptual article that views employability at the intersection of agency and structure. Specifically, these authors used Bourdieu’s (1972) theory of practice to argue that employability is shaped by a structured context and in relation to others. Recent theorizing on sustainable careers (De Vos et al., 2020) has also suggested that employability, as a potential indicator of career sustainability, is a result of person-context interactions.

Despite these recent efforts to contextualize employability research, there is still much we do not know. Notably, the three articles mentioned above are conceptual papers, and there is

Table 1. Overview of special issue articles and their contribution to the main challenges.

Authors	Study Design	Sample	Theoretical Framework	C1: Employability Development	C2: Employability Contextualization
Doden, Grosemans, De Cuyper, Tschopp, & Grote	3-wave survey Latent change scores	358 Swiss professionals	Conservation of resource theory	Job insecurity can trigger increases in PE; resource acquisition is more salient than preservation in the face of job insecurity	
Decius, Knappstein, & Klug	2-wave survey Cross-lagged panel models	307 German employees	Conservation of resources theory	Informal learning enhances internal PE (but not external PE); self-regulated learning enhances external PE (but not internal); formal learning has no effects	
Gorbatov, Oostrom, & Khapova	Policy capturing (S1) 2-wave survey (S2) 2-wave survey (S3)	247 UK supervisors (S1) 246 Dutch students (S2) 390 US employees (S3)	Signaling theory	Personal branding can increase employability over and above established predictors	Personal brand equity – a professional field's recognition of someone's brand – mediates the effects of personal branding on employability
Akkermans, Tomlinson, & Anderson	Conceptual article	N/A	Signaling theory Social exchange theory	Effective signalling and high-quality social exchanges across employment phases can increase employability	Alignment between employers and workers is key in enhancing employability through information and resource exchanges
Rus, Wisse, De Jong, & Heesink	Multisource survey Leader-follower dyads	292 dyads of Dutch employees	Career roles model Fit theory		Exploration career role enactment relates positively to leaders' assessment of workers' employability in case of complementary fit (i.e., leader opening behaviours)
Forrier, De Cuyper, & Delva	Interview study Narrative approach	24 Flemish theatre actors	Social chronology framework	There are different ways in which people give meaning to and enact their past, current, and future employability	Five career narratives emphasize the critical role of employability scripts; connections between agency (career imagination) and structure (employability scripts)

a clear lack of empirical work studying employability from a contextualized perspective. For instance, qualitative and quantitative research could incorporate contextual elements more explicitly in their research designs. Using the example of Bourdieu's (1972) theory of practice again, this could mean that research taps into how the specific norms in a given professional field may shape what employability is and how it can be developed. Similarly, empirical research incorporating organizational and HR practices is still rare (for an exception, see Van Harten et al.'s (2020) special issue introduction article in the *International Journal of Human Resource Management*), even though various practices – such as recruitment, selection, talent development, and career management – significantly impact someone's employability (for an example, see Veth et al., 2019). Practically speaking, it could also mean customizing employability research to specific groups of workers. As employability research has primarily focused on theoretically schooled employees in organizations, scholars must broaden their scope by examining, for example, practically schooled workers, non-standard workers (e.g., agency and gig workers), and workers from different national and cultural contexts (see also Forrier et al., 2018).

Thankfully, challenges are there to be taken up! Therefore, our special issue explicitly called for research that would help enhance our understanding of a dynamic and contextualized perspective on employability. As we will detail next, together, the articles offer some fascinating new insights and ways forward to help solve these two critical challenges.

Lessons learned from this special issue

This special issue features six articles that offer novel insights into the two critical challenges we presented in the previous section. The first three articles by Doden et al., Decius et al., and Gorbatov et al. primarily tap into the first challenge of *capturing the dynamic nature of employability*, or employability development, by showing that job insecurity, workplace learning, and personal branding, respectively, contribute to increases in employability. The fourth article by Akkermans et al. focuses both on *employability development* and *contextualization* by presenting a conceptual process model of initial employability development as the result of employer-employee interactions. Finally, the fifth and sixth articles by Rus et al. and Forrier et al. mainly focus on the second challenge of *capturing the contextualized nature of employability*, or contextualization, by examining leader-follower fit and employability scripts, respectively, as critical contextual factors impacting employability. Below, we briefly discuss each article's main contributions to this special issue. Table 1 provides an overview.

In the first article, Doden et al. (2024) report on a three-wave quantitative study among 358 professionals from Switzerland in which they investigated how perceived job insecurity may affect changes in perceived employability. Based on conservation of resources theory (Hobfoll et al., 2018) and using latent change score models, they show that job insecurity can trigger positive changes in perceived employability. These findings support the resource acquisition perspective, indicating that when people are faced with job insecurity, they are likely to take action and increase their

resources (i.e., employability). The study by Doden et al. connects to a long-standing scholarly debate about how employability may be a new form of job security and how it may serve to counteract job insecurity (De Cuyper et al., 2012; Fugate et al., 2021). Although prior research regularly found negative associations between job insecurity and perceived employability when using a static between-person approach, Doden et al. show that this relationship is positive when applying a dynamic within-person approach. As such, their study contributes to taking up Challenge 1 by highlighting the importance of examining within-person changes in (predictors of) employability to complement the existing between-person approaches.

The second article by Decius et al. (2024) presents a two-wave survey study among 307 German employees to examine how various forms of workplace learning relate to different facets of perceived employability. Like Doden et al. (2024), they use conservation of resources theory (Hobfoll et al., 2018) to formulate their hypotheses about how workplace learning might affect perceptions of employability. Their findings offer a varied set of relationships between the two constructs. Specifically, the authors find that informal learning enhances quantitative and qualitative internal (but not external) employability. Furthermore, self-regulated learning only enhances qualitative external employability, whereas formal learning has no associations with employability whatsoever. The article by Decius et al. provides some much-needed empirical evidence on the relationships between workplace learning and employability (see, e.g., Römgens et al., 2020), which have often been intuitively assumed but rarely empirically tested. Decius et al.'s research primarily contributes to taking up Challenge 1 by elucidating how different types of workplace learning are (not) predictive of employability perceptions. In particular, it shows that these relationships are nuanced and should be examined at a more fine-grained level.

The third article by Gorbatov et al. (2024) introduces the concept of personal branding into the employability debate. Through a policy capturing study (Study 1, $N = 247$ UK supervisors), a two-wave survey study ($N = 246$ based in the Netherlands), and another two-wave survey study ($N = 390$ employees based in the US), and based on signaling theory (Connelly et al., 2011), Gorbatov et al. demonstrate across the three studies that personal branding can be an effective individual strategy to nurture employability. In addition, personal brand equity – the degree to which someone believes their professional field recognizes their personal brand as valuable – mediates this relationship. Their findings primarily contribute to taking up Challenge 1 by showing that personal branding and the equity of personal brands can contribute to employability development. Although research on employability has focused heavily on individual agentic factors in recent years (Forrier et al., 2018; Van Harten et al., 2022), these studies have typically looked at capital and competencies as key predictors of employability (see, e.g., Harari et al., 2021). Gorbatov et al.'s article adds personal branding as an individual behavioural strategy that can serve as a meaningful way to enhance employability. Their study also makes a contribution to solving Challenge 2 by showing that the effects of such behaviours must be mobilized by a brand's equity, implying that personal

branding only works if someone's brand is considered to be appealing in a given professional context.

The fourth article by Akkermans et al. (2024) presents a conceptual process model of initial employability development. Based on signalling theory (Connelly et al., 2011) and social exchange theory (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005), the authors propose that graduates build their initial employability through ongoing information and resource exchanges with their employers. Specifically, they argue that during the pre-flow phase, signalling is dominant on both sides of the employment relationship. Subsequently, social exchanges become more important during the in-flow and through-flow phases. Hence, according to Akkermans et al., employability development can be enhanced through high-quality information exchanges (signalling) and resource exchanges (social exchange). This article focuses on a specific group of labour market entrants to theorize about employability development and connects with the literature on graduate and worker employability, as well as research in the area of school-to-work transitions (see also Akkermans et al., 2023; Blokker et al., 2023). The conceptual model contributes to solving Challenge 1 by conceptualizing employability from a process perspective, evolving across different phases (or HR flows) as a result of signalling and social exchange. Furthermore, it speaks to Challenge 2 by explicitly looking at employer-employee interactions as a critical factor in employability development. In line with the remaining two articles of this special issue by Rus et al. (2024) and Forrier et al. (2024), a core argument is that the stakeholders involved in employability development need to be aligned (or have high levels of fit).

Article five by Rus et al. (2024) offers a multi-source study among 292 leader-follower dyads based in the Netherlands to examine how the compatibility between leader and follower behaviours may shape leaders' assessment of workers' employability. Leveraging the career roles model (Hoekstra, 2011) and fit theory (Kristof-Brown et al., 2005), the authors demonstrate that employees' exploration career role enactment behaviour can trigger enhanced employability scores from their supervisors in the case of low supervisor opening behaviours (i.e., focus on exploitation rather than exploration). In other words, workers' employability assessment was particularly favourable when they demonstrated an ability to adapt and explore, and when their supervisor was mainly focused on consolidating (rather than stimulating exploration). Rus et al. conclude that their findings support the complementary fit (instead of the supplementary fit) hypothesis, which states that one party's strengths should compensate for the other party's weaknesses. Their study is among the first to explicitly connect leadership concepts – in this case, ambidextrous leadership – with employability research. In doing so, Rus et al. contribute mainly to help solve Challenge 2 by demonstrating that individual career exploration behaviours only contribute to employability development (as assessed by their leaders) if these behaviours complement their leader's closing behaviours. Hence, employability development occurs when high levels of complementary fit are achieved between leader and follower.

In the sixth and final article, Forrier et al. (2024) present a qualitative study among 24 Flemish theatre actors. Using a narrative approach and based on the social chronology

framework (Gunz & Mayrhofer, 2018), the authors examine how career imagination, employability scripts, and action contributed to employability in a professional field in flux. Their findings point to five narratives characterizing fit (i.e., making your own luck, letting it happen, leaving a different mark), out-of-fit (i.e., embracing anachronism), and misfit (i.e., letting go). The study by Forrier et al. offers important new insights into the contextualized nature of employability development by conceptualizing employability not as a purely individual characteristic. Instead, they argue that employability is made up of an active interplay between personal, contextual, and temporal elements, as proposed by the social chronology framework (Gunz & Mayrhofer, 2018). This approach connects with Challenge 2 as it offers novel insights into the contextual embeddedness of employability. Moreover, it contributes to better theorizing on the contextual nature of employability (Forrier et al., 2018). Their article also provides input for taking up Challenge 1, as it looks at past, current, and future employability from a narrative approach.

Contextualizing employability development: a research agenda

The studies in this special issue provide novel insights related to the two critical challenges of employability research presented in this article: to better understand the *dynamic* and *contextualized* nature of employability. Based on those insights, we conclude this article with an overarching research agenda that could move the field forward and help resolve these crucial challenges further.

Improving our understanding of the dynamic nature of employability

The articles in this special issue suggest that employability is, at least to a certain extent, malleable and can change over time. For example, Doden et al. (2024) find that job insecurity can enhance employability perceptions across three waves that were separated roughly six months and one year. Similarly, Gorbатов et al. (2024) use a one-year time lag in their final study to show that personal branding is related to employability. Using a much shorter time lag of four weeks, Decius et al. (2024) find that various forms of workplace learning relate to facets of perceived employability. In their qualitative study, Forrier et al. (2024) also incorporated the role of time by asking their participants about their past, present, and future employability-related issues. Finally, Akkermans et al. (2024) conceptualize employability across several HR-related flows, including pre-flow, in-flow, through-flow, and out-flow. Taken together, these studies indicate that time matters for employability research. At the same time, these findings raise further questions and offer additional opportunities for employability research to further specify and understand the role of time.

First, from a theoretical perspective, future studies should incorporate and test theories that help understand and explain the temporal dynamics of employability. Forrier et al.'s (2024) article offers some compelling opportunities in this regard by leveraging the social chronology framework (Gunz & Mayrhofer, 2018) to argue that employability develops over

time as a result of a co-evolution of individual and contextual changes. They also note that individuals engage in meaning-making throughout their careers to develop a coherent career narrative. Other theories in career studies and psychology may be similarly valuable to help understand and explain how employability develops over time. For example, classic career models, such as Super's (1969) vocational development theory and Schein's (1996) career anchor model, have already theorized about how different needs and values may contribute to successful career development at different career stages. More recently, career construction theory (see, e.g., Savickas, 2002) proposed that different mechanisms help people make career decisions in different phases of their careers. Similarly, lifespan development theories in psychology have theorized about how individual motivations and attitudes change across the lifespan. For example, socioemotional selectivity theory (Carstensen, 2006) states that individuals' ability to monitor time enables them to change motivations and (career) goals across the lifespan, such as an increased focus on generativity in later life stages. These theories, and many more, seem highly relevant for understanding the dynamic nature of employability development across life and career phases, as they can help explain how employability may be shaped by different predictors and mechanisms across the lifespan. Hence, we encourage scholars to leverage such theories from the domains of careers and psychology to strengthen the overall theorizing around employability (see also Forrier et al., 2018).

Second, from a conceptual perspective, several articles in this special issue signal a need to deepen our understanding of the concepts already used in employability research as well as to add new ones. For instance, Doden et al. (2024) show that job insecurity can enhance perceived employability, which is contrary to most research findings thus far. Their findings imply that different time lags and a focus on interpersonal vs. intrapersonal change can shed new light on existing concepts. To illustrate, researchers often position employability as a predictor of career success (often considered the "ultimate" career outcome), yet these two constructs might also be reversely or reciprocally related over time (see, e.g., Seibert et al., 2024; Spurk et al., 2019). Furthermore, Decius et al. (2024) offer a thought-provoking set of findings around workplace learning and perceived employability, showing that these relationships are far from straightforward and unified. Their results, like Doden et al.'s study, indicate that a more fine-grained and nuanced perspective of employability predictors is necessary to fully capture how employability may develop over time.

In addition to deepening the understanding of existing concepts, it is equally crucial to add relevant new ones. Gorbatov et al. (2024), for example, show that personal branding can be an effective behavioral strategy to enhance employability. Furthermore, Forrier et al. (2024) add the concept of career imagination (Cohen & Duberley, 2021) to the nomological net of employability, arguing that individuals use career imagination to make sense of their work and careers. As such, personal branding and career imagination may be crucial concepts that can contribute to a better understanding of employability development. We see many other potentially relevant concepts that can serve a similar role, yet that have not or rarely been leveraged in employability research. For example, future

work selves and proactive career behaviors (Strauss et al., 2012) are likely relevant drivers of employability development. Similarly, concepts such as career inaction (Verbruggen & De Vos, 2020) and foregone identity dwelling (Obodaru, 2017) could hinder successful employability development. Future research could leverage such concepts to shed more light on employability development over time.

Third, from a methodological perspective, we see two urgent opportunities to clarify our understanding of the dynamic nature of employability. The first one is a need to obtain more clarity about appropriate time lags in employability research. As Van Harten et al. (2022) showed, there has been little consistency in this regard thus far. This special issue's articles also used a wide variety of time lags. However, we believe that future studies should more carefully and deliberately use time lags based on theoretical and conceptual grounds. Employability may be dynamic in the very short run, which could be measured by, for example, diary studies. Yet, at least some aspects of employability are unlikely to change on a daily basis, therefore requiring time lags that span a longer period. Thus, while both short-term and long-term change are likely, so far, unfortunately, studies rarely provide an explicit rationale for their choice of time lags. An important first step would, therefore, be to make theory-informed decisions about time lags and provide explicit explanations for them in articles. A second crucial methodological improvement would be that scholars accurately test the temporal dynamics assumed by the theories they leverage in their studies. For example, if studies use conservation of resources theory to theorize about employability development as the result of resource accumulation (or loss) processes, they should ideally (1) have multiple waves, (2) measure specific resources, and (3) assess changes over time. Similarly, studies mobilizing social exchange theory should incorporate (1) multiple waves, (2) employer and employee input, and (3) assessment of the (lack of) fulfillment of promises (i.e., the exchange relationship). Too often, at least one of these criteria is absent in empirical work. Therefore, we urge scholars to translate theoretical dynamics into accurate empirical research designs.

Improving our understanding of the contextual nature of employability

This special issue's articles offer intriguing insights into a more contextualized perspective on employability development. For example, Rus et al. (2024) show that leader behaviours and assessments are crucial to workers' employability opportunities and enhancement. Specifically, their findings suggest that employer-rated employability can be increased in a context of complementary fit where the supervisor focuses on exploitation and the workers on (career) exploration. Similarly, Akkermans et al. (2024) conceptualize initial employability development as an active interplay between employers and graduates. They argue that high-quality information and resource exchanges between the two parties are essential for developing high-quality employment relationships and employability. Furthermore, Forrier et al. (2024) emphasize the essential role of employability scripts in shaping and influencing employability development. Their study shows that

such scripts represent the contextual requirements for employability, thereby explicitly embedding the meaning of employability within a specific context (in their case, a professional field). Gorbatov et al.'s (2024) study also points to the importance of matching individual behaviours with contextual requirements, showing that personal branding's effects go through personal brand equity, and signalling that branding is only effective when the brand is seen as valuable in a specific professional context. In all, these studies provide important steps towards a more complete understanding of the contextual nature of employability development. Building on these insights, we formulate several additional research avenues below.

First, theoretically speaking, the studies by Gorbatov et al. (2024), Akkermans et al. (2024), Rus et al. (2024), and Forrier et al. (2024) all share a common theoretical component related to alignment and fit. Specifically, the common denominator across these four articles is that employability development can only be successful when different stakeholders involved in employability are aligned, and when individual strategies match with contextual requirements. These findings open up two crucial theoretical research avenues that have been explored only to a limited degree thus far. First, employability studies could leverage theoretical notions of career scripts, on which the idea of employability scripts is based. Career scripts are sets of guidelines that people think of when considering their careers, and that form the rules and norms for shaping a career path (Barley, 1989). Studies in this area have applied career scripts to, for example, global careers (Cappellen & Janssens, 2010), academic careers (Dany et al., 2011), and the role of culture in careers (Martin et al., 2022). The basic idea underlying all these studies is that there are scripts dictating what is (not) appropriate in career development in a specific context. These ideas can easily be applied to employability as well, for example, by studying how certain professional, occupational, national, and cultural scripts may determine what successful employability development means and how it can be achieved. Second and relatedly, future research on employability should leverage ideas from person-environment fit theories (Kristof-Brown et al., 2005; Van Vianen, 2018). For example, high levels of person-job and person-organization fit are likely to be crucial factors in determining employability development, particularly within a given (organizational) context.

Another relevant indicator of fit in this regard would be person-career fit (Parasuraman et al., 2000). Recent theorizing on sustainable careers (De Vos et al., 2020; Van der Heijden et al., 2020) considers person-career fit to be a critical process through which career sustainability can be enhanced. Like the social chronology framework (Gunz & Mayrhofer, 2018) used in Forrier et al.'s (2024) study in this special issue, De Vos et al.'s (2020) conceptual model of sustainable careers proposes that dynamic interactions between personal, contextual, and temporal factors shape person-career fit. Subsequently, high levels of person-career fit are assumed to enhance career sustainability in the form of a balance between happiness, health, and productivity over time. Importantly, sustainable career theorizing emphasizes the important role of employability as an indicator of career sustainability and, hence, a result of person-career fit (De Vos et al., 2020). As such, the sustainable career

framework may be a useful model for future research aiming to better understand the contextual nature of employability.

From a conceptual perspective, this special issue's articles signal an opportunity to enhance our understanding of the contextualized nature of employability through stronger interdisciplinary connectivity. For example, Rus et al. (2024) report that it would be valuable to leverage concepts from leadership research to better understand how leaders may influence workers' employability development. In their case, ambidextrous leadership offers a meaningful contribution by showing that the complementary fit between opening and closing behaviours of the supervisor and the career behaviours of workers are key to successful employability development. Similarly, research on leader-member exchanges has the potential to help understand how leader-follower interactions may impact employability (Epitropaki et al., 2021), which connects with the previous theoretical suggestion around alignment and fit (here, the alignment between leader and employee). More broadly speaking, incorporating leadership concepts into employability research could shed more light on the relational nature of employability by taking a multiple-stakeholder perspective (Forrier et al., 2018).

Another useful stream of literature that could enrich employability research focuses on human resource management (HRM). This special issue's article by Akkermans et al. (2024) highlights this by conceptualizing employability development along various HR flows, hereby connecting it with existing literature on recruitment, selection, talent development, and career management. It is highly surprising that employability research has not been connected more often and more strongly with HRM research. After all, one's employability is, at least partially, dependent upon hiring, development, and promotion decisions by recruiters and managers. Moreover, organizational employability investments can be beneficial for workers and employers alike (Fugate et al., 2021; Van Harten et al., 2020). For employers, this can mean having workers who are productive and flexible, thereby contributing to organizational performance and adaptability. Similarly, for employees, it means being able to continuously develop and achieve career success (Seibert et al., 2024).

Based on the above, we believe there is much promise in creating more solid connections with research streams focused on, for example, personnel selection (Sackett & Lievens, 2008), work design (Parker, 2014), and talent management (Collings & Mellahi, 2009). Such connections could help understand how recruiters might view applicants' characteristics and behaviours, and how selection practices might influence their employability, for example by focusing on person-job versus person-organization fit or by emphasizing current fit versus future potential. Similarly, understanding how specific work design elements might help people flourish at work, and how talent and management development practices in organizations are applied to select people for future high-level positions are also exciting directions for future employability research. More broadly, employability research could connect with existing research on internal and external labour markets and with notions of sponsored vs. contested mobility to embed employability development within organizational and institutional contexts (see, e.g., Seibert et al., 2024).

As mentioned by several of our special issue articles' authors, and building on some of our previous suggestions, future research should address the dominant idea that employability is fully under the individual's control (see also Forrier et al., 2018). In addition to various contextual factors discussed before (e.g., leaders, employers, culture), employability is not likely to be a linear and plannable phenomenon that evolves along a steady and stable route. Instead, in a work and career landscape characterized by increasing volatility and career transitions (De Vos et al., 2021; Sullivan & Al Ariss, 2021), employability development is likely to be the consequence of significant disruptions and events. In their model of voluntary turnover, Lee and Mitchell (1994) already argued that shock events at work can trigger future turnover. Similarly, event systems theory (Morgeson et al., 2015) proposes that major events can have a significant influence on organizational and individual outcomes, and affective events theory (Weiss & Cropanzano, 1996) argues that work-related events can have a profound effect on people's emotions and behaviours. Following from this, it is likely that employability development is also significantly impacted by major events in people's work, careers, and lives. For example, a sudden layoff can unexpectedly diminish someone's employability, whereas an unexpected promotion might enhance it. In this light, recent research on career shocks – disruptive events that trigger career reflection (Akkermans et al., 2018, 2021) – is a potentially relevant area to incorporate in employability research. Research shows that such shocks can indeed impact employability development (Blokker et al., 2019; Ren et al., 2023) and that they are likely to be a crucial element in achieving career success (Seibert et al., 2024) and career sustainability (De Vos et al., 2020). Hence, future studies on employability could incorporate disruptive events, such as career shocks, to better understand the complex interplay of personal, contextual, and temporal elements impacting employability development.

Finally, a better understanding of the contextual nature of employability also implies that we must be aware of *how* we study it in research projects. In particular, as we have pointed out earlier, the articles in this special issue signal that a multiple-stakeholder perspective of employability is needed that can assess the alignment between employers (and leaders) and workers. This issue is not only crucial from a theoretical perspective but also from a measurement perspective. That is, if alignment – such as between a leader's opening or closing behaviours and followers' career exploration (Rus et al., 2024) – is indeed so important, it must be captured in research designs and measurements more accurately. For example, personal brand equity (Gorbatov et al., 2024) could be assessed by significant external stakeholders (e.g., hiring managers) to test if someone's personal brand is indeed uniquely valued and can mobilize someone's personal branding activities into higher (other-rated) employability. Similarly, if scholars would test Akkermans et al.'s (2024) propositions about information and resource exchanges between employers and workers, such studies should include ratings from both parties involved. Adopting such a multiple-stakeholder perspective with employability ratings from multiple perspectives opens up many new questions. For example, how strongly are self-rated

and other-rated employability related? Do self-rated and other-rated employability have similar predictors and outcomes? And does this apply to the different types (e.g., personal strengths, perceptions, transitions) of employability? Previous research indicates that these questions likely have no straightforward answers. Broadly speaking, there is mixed evidence depending on the concepts studied. For example, although the differences between self-ratings and other ratings of organizational citizenship behaviours are small (Carpenter et al., 2014), such differences are typically larger when studying leadership traits and behaviours (Braddy et al., 2014; McKee et al., 2018). More specifically related to employability, Stoffers et al. (2020) showed that self-ratings were consistently higher than supervisor ratings of employability. Furthermore, Van der Heijden et al. (2009) found that both self-rated and supervisor-rated employability predicted objective career outcomes among younger workers, but that these patterns were divergent among older workers, with self-ratings being positively related but supervisor ratings being negatively related to these career outcomes. These findings all emphasize the need for robust research designs that help generate a more complete understanding of a multiple-stakeholder view on employability.

Concluding note

This article – and the entire special issue connected to it – aimed to contribute to a better understanding of the dynamic and contextual nature of employability development. The six studies included in this special issue (see Table 1 for an overview) offer compelling insights that can help in resolving these two critical challenges. Moreover, in this article, we provided additional ideas about how future research can move the field forward even further. We hope that, altogether, this collection of seven articles will inspire researchers and practitioners alike and will trigger more novel and exciting research in the area of employability.

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ORCID

Jos Akkermans  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-2870-6921>
 Pascale Le Blanc  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-4693-9980>
 Beatrice Van der Heijden  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-8672-5368>
 Ans De Vos  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-5601-6085>

Data availability statement

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analysed in this study.

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