

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Perceived employability and well-being: An overview

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Abstract

This article aims to provide an overview of research, theoretically and empirically, on the relationship between perceived employability and well-being, with a view on arriving at suggestions for future research and implications for practice. Perceived employability concerns individuals' perception of their possibilities to obtain and maintain employment. A major hypothesis in the employability literature is that perceived employability causes well-being. Theoretically, the dominant assumption is that perceived employability provides individuals with feelings of control over their employment situation, which in turn promotes well-being. However, one could also argue for reversed causation, when well-being promotes perceived employability. Taken together, this may suggest reciprocal causation. Empirically, evidence for the relationship between perceived employability and well-being remains inconclusive, both concerning the strength and the direction of the relationship.

Keywords

perceived employability, well-being, overview

Rezumat

Acest articol își propune să ofere o imagine de ansamblu asupra cercetării, teoretice și empirice, cu privire la relația dintre angajabilitatea percepută și confortul psihologic, ajungând la sugestii pentru cercetări viitoare și implicații pentru domeniul practic. Angajabilitatea percepută se referă la percepția indivizilor în legătură cu posibilitățile lor de a obține și păstra un loc de muncă. O ipoteză importantă în literatura de specialitate privind angajarea este aceea că angajabilitatea percepută duce la confort psihologic. Teoretic, ipoteza dominantă constă în faptul că angajabilitatea percepută oferă indivizilor sentimentul de control asupra situației lor privind locul de muncă, care, la rândul său, favorizează apariția confortului psihologic. Cu toate acestea, se pot găsi argumente și pentru legătura de cauzalitate inversă. Empiric, dovezile pentru relația dintre angajabilitatea percepută și confortul psihologic rămân neconcludente, atât în ceea ce privește puterea relației, cât și direcția acesteia.

Cuvinte-cheie

angajabilitatea percepută, confort psihologic, privire de ansamblu

Résumé

Cet article essaie de livrer un aperçu de la recherche, soit théoriquement, soit empiriquement, sur la relation entre l'emploi réalisé et le bien-être, avec une vue sur la réalisation de suggestions de la recherche future et l'implication de la pratique. L'emploi réalisé concerne la perception d'individus sur leurs possibilités pour recevoir et maintenir leur travail. Une hypothèse majeure dans la littérature de l'emploi est que l'emploi réalisé produit le bien-être. Théoriquement,

l'hypothèse dominante est que l'emploi réalisé fournit des individus avec des sentiments de contrôle sur leur situation d'emploi, ce qui favorise en retour le bien-être. Néanmoins, on peut également discuter de la causalité renversée, quand le bien-être favorise l'emploi réalisé. Pris ensemble, ceci peut suggérer la causalité réciproque. Empiriquement, preuve de la relation entre l'emploi réalisé et le bien-être reste sans résultat concluant, à la fois en ce qui concerne la puissance et la direction de la relation.

Mots-clés

l'emploi réalisé, le bien-être, aperçu

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At the most aggregate level, individual employability concerns the ability to be employed (Hillage & Pollard, 1998). Individual employability has gained increasing scholarly attention over the past few decades because it ties in with assumed changes in the employee-employer relationship. In particular, the responsibility for career development has shifted away from the employer towards the individual (Nauta, van Vianen, Van der Heijden, van Dam, & Willemsen, 2009; Sullivan & Baruch, 2009). The reason is that employers can no longer guarantee life-time employment due to greater competition (Berntson, Sverke, & Marklund, 2006). In order to remain competitive, employers need to be proactive in dealing with changes in demand. This implies that they need to be flexible also at the level of personnel staffing in terms of quantity (i.e., the amount of staff needed) as well as quality (i.e., having “employable employees” who adapt their skills and knowledge in line with technological advancements, Van der Heijden, 2005). Consequently, employees need to rely more on their individual ability to secure employment in order to comply with these changes, which brings the notion of individual employability to the fore. Employability for individuals may provide an alternative to job security as individuals may find security in the belief that their skills are not tied to a single employer but instead are transferable across organizations (De Cuyper, Mäkikangas, Kinnunen, Mauno, & De Witte, 2012). On a more positive note, employability for individuals provides feelings of control over the career and it enables individuals to pursue and realize their own career goals (Fugate, Kinicki, & Ashfort, 2004). A

plausible assumption then is that individual employability fosters well-being.

Research has started to test this assumption with varying success (e.g., Aronsson & Göransson, 1999; Berntson & Marklund, 2007; De Cuyper, Bernhard-Oettel, Berntson, De Witte, & Alarco, 2008; Kirves, De Cuyper, Kinnunen, & Nätti, 2011; Silla, De Cuyper, Gracia, Peiro, & De Witte, 2009). Cross-sectional research overall attests for a positive relationship between individual employability and well-being. Longitudinal evidence concerning the causal direction is rather inconclusive and points towards three different options: 1) causation from individual employability to well-being; 2) from well-being to individual employability; and 3) reciprocal causation.

Our general aim is to provide an overview of research, theoretically and empirically, on the causal relationship between individual employability and well-being, with a view on arriving at suggestions for future research and implications for practice. We see individual employability in terms of perceived employability, for reasons outlined in the section below.

Perceived employability

Different interpretations of individual employability exist: some authors focus on socio-demographic factors (e.g., education level, Groot & Maassen Van den Brink, 2000), others focus on personal factors such as competences (e.g., professional expertise, Van der Heijde & Van der Heijden, 2006), or dispositions to obtain and maintain employment (e.g., openness to changes at work, Fugate & Kinicki, 2008). Still others

choose to focus on perceived employability, that is, the individual's perception of his or her possibilities to obtain and maintain employment (Vanhercke, De Cuyper, Peeters, & De Witte, 2014). We follow this last line for two reasons. First, individuals are prone to act on their perception rather than on any objective reality (Roskies & Louis-Guerin, 1990). This has led to a research stream on individual perceptions of employability, of which perceived employability is perhaps most dominant (for a conceptual discussion, see Vanhercke et al., 2014). Second, perceived employability, unlike other subjective interpretations of individual employability, is formed on the basis of individual and contextual features and therefore more integrative or holistic. In other words, perceived employability is considered an output approach as the perception of employment possibilities is the result of input factors, that is, personal factors (e.g., competences, dispositions), contextual factors (e.g., total amount of vacancies on the labor market, Forrier & Sels, 2003; Rothwell & Arnold, 2007), and their interactions (Vanhercke, et al., 2014).

The definition of perceived employability by Vanhercke and colleagues (2014), that is, the individual's perception of his or her possibilities to obtain and maintain employment, captures the four main characteristics shared among the various definitions of perceived employability.

First, perceived employability is a "subjective evaluation" which corresponds with a more psychological interpretation of employability. The same objective event will evoke different perceptions in individuals. For example, individuals with similar socio-demographic profiles and in similar jobs and sectors may differ in their perception of employability based on, for example, their knowledge (of the labor market), their access to networks, or their motivation to participate in employability-enhancing activities (Wittekind, Raeder, & Grote, 2010).

Second, in the broadest sense, perceived employability concerns employment "possibilities" (Berntson & Marklund, 2007). The term "possibilities" is broad as it implies the synthesis of personal factors, structural factors and their interactions. Personal factors

are bound to the individual, such as competences (Van der Heijde & Van der Heijden, 2006) and dispositions (Fugate & Kinicki, 2008), whereas structural factors are at the level of the job (e.g., networks, Eby, Butts, & Lockwood, 2003; Forrier & Sels, 2003; Griffeth, Steel, Allen, & Bryan 2005; Ng, Eby, Sorensen, & Feldman, 2005), the organization (e.g., support for career development, London, 1993; Ng et al., 2005) or the society (e.g., the total number of available jobs, Forrier & Sels, 2003; McQuaid & Lindsay, 2005; Rothwell & Arnold, 2007).

Third, our definition refers to "obtaining and maintaining" employment. This attests to the idea that perceived employability is important for different groups on the labor market and throughout the career. Concerning the individual career, we view perceived employability to be critical in three career phases which are inspired by the description of Cron and Slocum's career phases (1986), that is, consolidation and maintenance of employment, transitions, and exploration of the labor market. In the current era the economy and technology are changing at an increasing rate (Westphal, 2002). In order to keep up with these changes employees need to be able to change accordingly. As such, from time to time employees will need to invest in updating their knowledge and skills in order to maintain good performance in their current employment (Van der Heijde & Van der Heijden, 2006). By doing so, they maintain their perceived employability for their current employment. We refer to this as the consolidation and maintenance career phase. However, if employees wish to transition to other employment at own will it is important to perceive themselves as employable in other jobs too (Berntson & Marklund, 2007; Rothwell & Arnold, 2007; Van Dam, 2004). This also accounts for those whose employment has been made redundant, that is, the unemployed (Wanberg, Zhu, & Van Hooft, 2010; Westaby & Braithwaite, 2003). We view transitions broadly as transitions between jobs, organizations, and sectors. Perceived employability may also refer to transitions in and out the labor market, for example after maternity leave (Pronzato, 2009) or upon the prospect of retirement (Van der Heijden, Schalk, & van Veldhoven, 2008).

We refer to this as the career phase of transitions. Finally, perceived employability is relevant for those trying to enter the labor market for the first time, that is, (graduate) students. (Graduate) Students need to define what type of jobs they want and what competences these types of jobs they desire require in order to maximize their possibilities of attaining those jobs (Hillage & Pollard, 1998; Rothwell, Jewel, & Hardie, 2009). This is generally referred to as the exploration career phase by Cron and Slocum (1986). The exploration career phase can also present itself again at a later point in the career, for example, when the (employed or unemployed) individual decides to proceed along a different career path as the one he or she has been following.

Fourth, perceived employability refers to “employment” possibilities, be they with the current employer (i.e., on the internal labor market) or with another employer (i.e., on the external labor market). This distinction relates to perceived internal employability and perceived external employability, respectively (e.g., De Cuyper & De Witte, 2010; Eby et al., 2003; Rothwell & Arnold, 2007).

In all, perceived employability has proven to be an integrative concept: it applies to different labor market groups, career phases, and types of employment while also taking both personal and structural factors into account. As such, we will describe, at a later point, several avenues for future research which urge scholars to take the different facets to perceived employability into account as the relationship with well-being may prove to be more complex.

Perceived employability and well-being

We define well-being broadly, in general and in relation to work. Well-being in general refers to the presence of pleasant affect (e.g., feelings of happiness) and the absence of unpleasant affect (e.g., psychological distress) (Luhmann, Hofmann, Eid, & Lucas, 2012; Mäkikangas, Feldt, Kinnunen, Tolvanen, Kinnunen, & Pulkkinen, 2006). In a similar vein, work-related well-being can be framed positively, for example in terms of work

engagement, or instead negatively, for example in terms of burnout (Xanthopoulou, Bakker, Demerouti, & Schaufeli, 2007).

Most scholars agree that the nature of the relationship between perceived employability and well-being is positive, which has found considerable support. For example, there is empirical evidence for the positive association between perceived employability and life satisfaction (De Cuyper et al., 2008), work engagement (De Cuyper et al., 2008), psychological well-being (Kinnunen, Mäkikangas, Mauno, Siponen, & Nätti, 2011), and job satisfaction among the employed (De Cuyper & De Witte, 2008). Similarly, research has established a positive relationship between perceived employability and well-being among the unemployed (Mckee-Ryan, Kinicki, Song, & Wanberg, 2005; Vansteenkiste, Lens, De Witte, & Feather, 2005; Wanberg, 2012).

There is more debate regarding the issue of causality, as longitudinal studies showed: 1) a positive effect of perceived employability on well-being; 2) a positive effect of well-being on perceived employability; and 3) each having a positive effect on each other at the same time. More precisely, among the employed, the studies by Berntson and Marklund (2007) and Vanhercke, Kirves, De Cuyper, Verbruggen, Forrier, and De Witte (2015) showed a positive effect of perceived employability on well-being. In line with these results, but with a focus on negative well-being indicators, Kirves and colleagues (2011) found that perceived employability had a negative impact on psychological symptoms among the employed. Likewise, a study by De Cuyper, Raeder, Van der Heijden, and Wittekind (2012) established that perceived employability had a negative effect on depersonalization for the employed, when controlled for attrition. However, among the unemployed, Vanhercke et al. (2015) found evidence for a reversed relationship, that is, a positive effect from well-being to perceived employability. Finally, among the employed, both effects appeared indirectly in a cross-lagged study by De Cuyper and colleagues (2012) in that perceived employability related negatively to felt job insecurity, and vice

versa, and felt job insecurity related positively to exhaustion, and vice versa.

In the following we discuss these different options – causation from perceived employability to well-being, from well-being to perceived employability and reciprocal causation — from a theoretical point of view. We invite researchers to probe each of these alternatives in greater detail.

Perceived employability promotes well-being

Most authors would argue that perceived employability affects well-being in a linear and positive fashion. Their argument is that perceived employability brings about different resources.

First, individuals who perceive themselves as employable believe they can secure work with different employers. This provides them with a feeling of power in and control over the employment relationship. This feeling of control, in turn, promotes well-being (Berntson & Marklund, 2007; Fugate et al., 2004; Marler, Barringer, & Milkovich, 2002) which is regarded to be an important resource for the individual (Hobfoll, 2002, p. 307). Vander Elst, De Cuyper, and De Witte (2011) found a positive relationship between perceived control and different indicators of well-being.

Second, the powerful negotiation position of highly employable individuals allows them to be employed in high quality jobs, which foster well-being. As such, perceived employability brings about highly valued job resources, such as autonomy, professional development, and social support (Xanthopoulou et al., 2007), which are critical features in promoting well-being. In this respect, the study by Vanhercke (2015) established that skill utilization mediates the positive effect of (external) perceived employability on well-being among the employed. On a related note, Pfeffer (1998) argues that individuals with high perceived employability will be more likely to leave a position that does not satisfy their needs. As such, perceived employability prevents the individual from feeling locked into his/her job, which is related to ill-being (Aronsson & Göransson, 1999).

Third and conversely, less employable individuals may fear loss of important resources related to work in general. This can be understood with reference to Jahoda (1982): employment satisfies important needs, such as the individual's need for financial security, personal development, and social contacts outside the family. Individuals who perceive themselves as less employable may anticipate the loss of these valued job resources, which relates to ill-being (De Witte, 1999). Along similar lines, Berntson (2008) argues that highly employable individuals feel well because they worry less about the consequences of not having a job.

Well-being enhances perceived employability

Though less frequently hinted at in the literature, it is plausible that well-being affects perceived employability. In this respect, “the selection effect” (Paul & Moser, 2009; Taris, 2002) states that low well-being may cause inadequate job performance, higher sick leave and absenteeism rates among employees (Parker & Kulik, 1995, as cited in De Cuyper, Mäkikangas et al., 2012) which are negative signals for the ability to work in the present job and possible future jobs (Mastekaasa, 1996, as cited in De Cuyper, Mäkikangas et al., 2012).

Along similar lines, Kasl (1982) states that well-being positively influences job search outcomes among the unemployed, such as reemployment. As such, being able to successfully make a transition into employment will stimulate one's perceived employability as well (Forrier, Verbruggen, & De Cuyper, 2015).

A positive upward spiral

Another plausible assumption is that both effects manifest themselves simultaneously (i.e., reciprocal causation). This can be understood with reference to the Conservation of Resources (COR) Theory (Hobfoll, 1989) and the Broaden and Build Theory of Positive Emotions (Fredrickson, 2001), which both relate to the underlying process of control.

First, the COR theory is built around the notion of personal resources and their mutual relationship. Personal resources are resources

that are tied to the individual's ability to recover from adversity and the individual's feeling of being able to control and to have an impact on the environment (Hobfoll, Johnson, Ennis, & Jackson, 2003). Personal resources enhance each other, leading to upward spirals of gain.

Perceived employability is such a resource: it helps individuals to cope with stressors, such as job insecurity. In the study by Silla and colleagues (2009), perceived employability moderated the negative relationship between job insecurity and life satisfaction: highly employable compared to less employable employees reported more life satisfaction when they perceived high job insecurity. This is in accordance with the Theory of Stress by Lazarus and Folkman (1984) which states that individuals appraise situations through primary and secondary appraisal. Primary appraisal concerns an individual's initial assessment of a situation, such as a restructuring of the organization where the individual is currently working. The situation can be regarded as: a) irrelevant to health and well-being; b) beneficial for health and well-being; or c) stressful. If the event is appraised as stressful, the individual makes a secondary appraisal about whether he or she has the resources, such as perceived employability, in order to cope with the stressful event. When an individual perceives to have adequate coping resources he/she is likely to feel in control of the stressful situation, which is related to well-being (Fugate et al., 2004; Marler et al., 2002).

Well-being may also be viewed as a personal resource: individuals who feel well may cope more effectively with stressful life events (e.g., Armstrong-Stassen, 1994; Leana & Feldman, 1992; Mckee-Ryan, Kinicki, Song, & Wanberg, 2005). For example, becoming unemployed is a stressful life event (Paul & Moser, 2009). Feeling well provides the individual with energy. This energy can be invested in adequate coping, such as job search (i.e., problem-focused coping, Leana & Feldman, 1990), which may help the individual to feel in control.

The gain spiral in COR Theory then implies that individuals who feel well are more likely to perceive themselves as employable

(see selection effect, Paul & Moser, 2009; Taris, 2002). Perceiving oneself as highly employable, in turn, induces feelings of control which promotes well-being, and so the positive spiral continues. This aligns with the arguments raised by Berntson (2008): people with high levels of employability are expected to find new employment with good working conditions, which would, in turn, make them healthier and more employable, and so on. This could be understood in terms of the healthy-worker effect: healthy, employable employees select and obtain good quality employment which makes them even healthier and more employable (Östlin, 1989).

Second, the Broaden and Build Theory of Positive Emotions (Fredrickson, 2001) states that positive affect broadens people's momentary thought-action repertoires. In other words, feeling well enables one to be more interactive with one's environment in terms of thinking and acting. For example, Steel, Schmidt and Shultz (2008) established a positive relationship between well-being (i.e., positive affect and happiness) and "openness to experience". Therefore, we may assume that people who feel well will tend to perceive more employment possibilities. Additionally, when people feel well they tend to feel more confident in approaching challenging situations and believe they will succeed in overcoming these situations. In this respect, Magaletta and Oliver (1999) established that self-efficacy and well-being are positively related. In other words, feeling well might enable one to feel confident in one's ability to obtain the employment possibilities one perceives. Consequently, this interactive approaching behavior stimulates opportunities to build enduring personal resources, such as perceived employability. By perceiving higher employability one will experience more control over his/her employment situation, and thus experience more well-being. As such, the spiral continues (De Cuyper, Mäkikangas et al., 2012).

Avenues for future research

In the section on "Perceived Employability" above we determined the integrative nature of the concept of perceived employability (it

applies to different labor market groups, career phases, and types of employment while also taking both personal and structural factors into account). In this section we urge researchers to take this into account when studying the relationship with other variables, such as well-being, as it may provide for a better understanding of the concept itself.

Most studies focus on the individual's perception of employment possibilities with other employers. However, the individual's perception of employment possibilities in the organization where he/she is currently working is largely overlooked (for exceptions, see, for example, De Cuyper & De Witte, 2011; Eby et al., 2003). Therefore, an important route for future research is to include both perceived internal and external employability in relation to well-being to probe whether their relationships and potential mediators are similar. In this respect, one could argue that perceived internal employability relates positively to well-being because the employee feels valued and supported by his/her employer, which strengthens his/her self-esteem (self-esteem can be viewed as one of the dimensions of well-being, Ryff, 1989).

Also, most research focusses on the perception of any other employment possibility, hence taking a quantitative stance vis-à-vis perceived employability. De Cuyper and De Witte (2008) argue that also the quality of perceived employment possibilities could be important and at times even negative. For example, they established that perceiving better employment possibilities with other employers relates negatively to well-being, since the employee may feel deprived by his/her employer as other employers are offering a better deal.

On a related note, there is limited research concerning the possible negative effects of perceived employability. Moreover, there is little research in which other parties than the individual are involved. For example, there is evidence that employees with high perceived employability will more likely voluntarily quit the organization when they perceive to have low job control (De Cuyper, Mauno, Kinnunen, & Mäkikangas, 2011), with potential negative consequences for the employer. Also, De Cuyper, Baillien, and De

Witte (2009) established that employees with high perceived employability who experience job insecurity will more likely engage in workplace bullying, which can have detrimental consequences for their colleagues.

Additionally, most studies to date are cross-sectional. In order to determine the direction of the relationship between perceived employability and well-being and to see how the effect develops we need more longitudinal research. Important considerations in this respect are the use of different time lags and three or more data collections. First, using different time lags is important as Judge and Watanabe (1993) claim that they generate different effect sizes. Second, three or more data waves enable to test for spiral associations and to detect other than linear relationships (Kirves, Kinnunen, De Cuyper, & Mäkikangas, 2014). An even stronger research design for determining causal change is the use of controlled trials in which perceived employability is manipulated between participants. For example, Philippaers, Camps, De Cuyper, Forrier, and Stouten (2015) conducted a vignette study in which participants received a description of a scenario inducing high versus low perceived employability. The manipulation proved to be successful. As such, we believe this to be a fruitful avenue for future research in which a change in the participants' well-being can be more readily attributed to the manipulation of perceived employability.

Next, studies on the relationship between perceived employability and well-being predominantly use self-report measures (i.e., questionnaires). Consequently, there is a risk of common method bias in that relationships are potentially influenced (Podsakoff, Mackenzie, Lee, & Podsakoff, 2003). A potential route for future research could be to use other-ratings or more objective measures for well-being, for example well-being as rated by significant others or number of doctor visits related to mental health issues.

Also, as perceived employability is relevant for (graduate) students, the employed as well as the unemployed, we argue for more studies in these different groups. Particularly with (graduate) students evidence is lacking.

Implications for practice

When considering the relationship between perceived employability and well-being, we find theoretical as well as empirical evidence for both directions of the effect. This may imply that by investing in one resource, be it perceived employability or well-being, one instigates an upward spiral of resource gain. This spiral will allow individuals to gain increasingly more resources which will help them to cope with various labor market challenges. As such, individuals will be able to prolong their labor market participation.

This upward spiral could be initiated in two ways. The first way is by investing in employability. In order to perceive oneself as employable one needs to perceive oneself as knowledgeable and skilled in both the domain of work, for example having professional expertise (Van der Heijde & Van der Heijden, 2006), and in the domain of career management, such as having a network that could help you get a (better) job (Hillage & Pollard, 1998). Within the rather turbulent labor market individuals will regularly need to assess their employability and make employability investments such as training and networking when needed, with support at different levels. Organizations, for example, are increasingly implementing internal mobility management programs in order to help employees navigate and develop their career path (De Vos, De Hauw, & Willemse, 2015). Also, national policy is developing several supporting tools, such as subsidies for career counseling and training (Forrier, Sels, & Stynen, 2009). When individuals perceive themselves as employable and thus in control of their career, this will stimulate their well-being (Berntson & Marklund, 2007; Fugate et al., 2004; Marler et al., 2002).

The second way to spark the upward spiral is to invest in well-being. We elaborated on theoretical arguments and reported on one study providing empirical evidence for the positive effect of well-being on perceived employability. National policy is increasingly focused on individuals' well-being as studies show the high costs associated with work-related mental illnesses such as burnout (e.g., Yaniv, 1995). In recent years, legislation is becoming more demanding towards

organizations: they need to implement (mental) health and safety measures in order to prevent employees from becoming ill. Along the lines of the healthy worker effect (Östlin, 1989) and the selection effect (Paul & Moser, 2009; Taris, 2002), feeling well should have a positive influence on performance and good performance is a criterion for employers to continue with employment of their employees. As such, prolonged employment in itself may stimulate employees' perceived employability.

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