

## RESEARCH ARTICLE

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# Too employable to feel well? Curvilinear relationship between perceived employability and employee optimal functioning

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### Abstract

Perceived employability has been advanced as critical to employee optimal functioning in today's turbulent labor market. However, evidence for a positive relationship between perceived employability and employee optimal functioning is modest. One possible explanation is that the relationship is not linear but curvilinear. Accordingly, we tested curvilinear relationships between perceived employability and work engagement (vigor and dedication) and burnout (exhaustion and depersonalization). Relationships were tested by means of hierarchical linear regressions in a sample of 459 employees. We found no curvilinear, but a linear and positive relationship between perceived employability and vigor and dedication. A quadratic (curvilinear) relationship was found between perceived employability and exhaustion and depersonalization, so that low and high levels of perceived employability were related to high levels of exhaustion and depersonalization.

### Keywords

Curvilinear relationships, employee optimal functioning, perceived employability, work engagement, burnout

### Rezumat

Angajabilitatea percepută a fost evidențiată ca fiind critică pentru funcționarea optimă a angajatului pe piața turbulentă a forței de muncă din zilele noastre. Cu toate acestea, dovezile în favoarea unei relații pozitive între angajabilitatea percepută și funcționarea optimă a angajatului sunt modeste. O posibilă explicație este aceea că relația nu este liniară, ci curbilinie. În consecință, am testat relațiile curbilinie dintre angajabilitatea percepută și implicarea în muncă (vigoarea și dedicarea) și burnout (epuizarea și depersonalizarea). Relațiile au fost testate cu ajutorul regresiei liniare ierarhice pe un eșantion de 459 de angajați. Nu am găsit o relație curbilinie, ci o relație liniară pozitivă între angajabilitatea percepută și vigoare și dedicare. O relație pătratică (curbilinie) a fost găsită între angajabilitatea percepută și epuizare și depersonalizare, astfel încât nivelurile scăzute și crescute ale angajabilității percepute sunt asociate cu niveluri ridicate de epuizare și depersonalizare.

### Cuvinte-cheie

relații curbilinie; funcționarea optimă a angajatului; angajabilitatea percepută; implicarea în muncă; burnout

## Résumé

La littérature met en avant l'employabilité perçue comme un élément critique du fonctionnement optimal des employés sur un marché du travail actuellement turbulent. Cependant, la recherche n'a jusqu'ici apporté que de modestes preuves empiriques d'une relation positive entre l'employabilité perçue et le fonctionnement optimal des employés. Une explication possible est que cette relation n'est pas linéaire, mais curvilinéaire. Pour cette raison, nous avons testé les relations curvilinéaires entre l'employabilité perçue et l'engagement professionnel (vigueur et dévouement) et le burnout (épuisement et dépersonnalisation). Ces relations ont été testées par des régressions linéaires hiérarchiques à partir d'un échantillon de 459 employés. Nous n'avons pas trouvé de relation curvilinéaire, mais bien une relation linéaire et positive entre l'employabilité perçue et la vigueur et le dévouement. Nous avons également mis en évidence une relation quadratique (curvilinéaire) entre l'employabilité perçue et l'épuisement et la dépersonnalisation. En d'autres mots, les niveaux les plus élevés et les plus bas d'employabilité perçue sont associés aux niveaux les plus hauts d'épuisement et de dépersonnalisation.

## Mots-clés

relation curvilinéaire, fonctionnement optimal des employés, l'employabilité perçue, l'engagement professionnel, le burnout

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Perceived employability concerns the individuals' appraisal of potential new employment opportunities (Berntson & Marklund, 2007; Forrier & Sels, 2003). These appraisals are powerful (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), in the sense that they affect employee's psychological optimal functioning in terms of well-being and strain. Perceived employability has been advanced as critical to employee's well-being and as a means to reduce strain in today's labor market (e.g., De Cuyper, Bernhard-Oettel, Berntson, De Witte, & Alarco, 2008). While appealing, support for the positive association between perceived employability and employee optimal functioning is relatively modest (e.g., De Cuyper, Raeder, Van der Heijden, & Wittekind, 2012b). Previous studies have shown that the relationship between perceived employability and optimal functioning is, if significant, weak to moderate (e.g., Kinnunen, Mäkikangas, Mauno, Siponen, & Nätti, 2011). However, the relationship may be more complex than previously assumed.

A plausible explanation for this complexity is that perceived employability may also have detrimental effects when above a specific threshold. Seeing many opportunities could become stressful, for example when they bring about decision stress or high expectations. This suggests that

perceived employability may be positive for employee optimal functioning up till a specific level, and negative at yet higher levels, so that the relationship would be curvilinear. The aim of this paper is to test the presumed curvilinear relationships between perceived employability and employee optimal functioning.

## Theoretical explanations for the relationship between perceived employability and employee optimal functioning

In the following, we first discuss why the relationship between perceived employability and employee optimal functioning has been seen as linear and positive, and continue with arguments as to why this relationship may not hold when perceived employability exceeds a specific threshold, so that the relationship becomes curvilinear.

Employee optimal functioning can be defined as both work-related well-being and strain, namely work engagement and burnout with three indicators each. Employees who feel engaged to their work, have a positive state of mind (Bakker, Demerouti, & Schaufeli, 2005). The three components of work engagement are absorption, vigor, and

dedication, with vigor, which signals high levels of energy and mental resilience, and dedication, which signals enthusiasm, inspiration and a sense of significance as the main aspects (Bakker, Demerouti, & Schaufeli, 2005). Employees who feel burned out experience a severe lack of energy (Bakker et al., 2005). The three elements of burnout are lack of personal accomplishment, exhaustion, and cynicism, with exhaustion, namely a sense of fatigue, and cynicism, namely a distant attitude vis-à-vis work as the key factors (Bakker et al., 2005; Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004). Work engagement and burnout have been advanced as two distinct dimensions of employee optimal functioning and are conceptualized as (negatively) related but distinct factors (Schaufeli, Salanova, Gonzalez-Roma, & Bakker, 2002). In sum, we define optimal functioning in terms of high work engagement and low burnout.

*The relationship between perceived employability and employee optimal functioning is positive...* We found in the literature three arguments for the generally considered positive relationship between perceived employability and employee optimal functioning. First employees with lower perceived employability do not see many, if any at all, alternatives. This may cause strain (e.g., burnout) in a labor market in constant turmoil and with a substantial risk of job loss (Riumallo-Herl et al., 2014). Similarly, it may forestall work engagement when employees feel locked-in their profession and stuck in their current job (Aronsson & Göransson, 1999; Berntson & Marklund, 2007). In contrast, employees with higher perceived employability may experience less strain or burnout because they can rely on alternatives in case of job insecurity or job loss and they may search for another job when they are no longer satisfied in their present job (Berntson, 2008), which then promotes work engagement.

Second, perceived employability creates a sense of freedom and control over the situation (Berntson, Näswall, & Sverke, 2010; De Cuyper et al., 2008). Employees who feel employable believe they can shape their career across jobs and organizations. Control is known to reduce strain and increase work

engagement (Demerouti, Bakker, De Jonge, Janssen, & Schaufeli, 2001): this assumption is at the core of influential theories, such as the Control Theory (Carver & Scheier, 1982) and Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2008).

Third, individuals with higher perceived employability are likely to be employed in 'better' jobs. Highly employable employees may have quitted unsatisfying jobs, jobs that provide a low income or that are less rewarding (De Cuyper et al., 2008; Trevor, 2001). Consequently, they tend to select jobs with better working conditions, which reduce burnout and promote work engagement (De Cuyper et al., 2008).

Previous studies have hypothesized a positive relationship between perceived employability and employee optimal functioning, implicitly assuming a linear relationship. Supporting evidence is however modest: the relationship between perceived employability and employee optimal functioning is, if significant, weak to moderate. For example, Kinnunen and colleagues (Kinnunen et al., 2011) found a negative effect of perceived employability on exhaustion, but De Cuyper and colleagues were not able to replicate this finding (De Cuyper, Mäkikangas, Kinnunen, Mauno, & De Witte, 2012a). Although De Cuyper and colleagues (De Cuyper et al., 2008) found a positive relationship between perceived employability and work engagement, the strength of this relationship was rather small. One possible explanation for the relatively weak association between perceived employability and employee optimal functioning is that this relationship is curvilinear.

*...Unless employees are "too" employable.* In the following section, we will elaborate on three arguments regarding why perceived employability, when too high, may hinder employee optimal functioning. First, individuals with plenty of perceived employment alternatives have to monitor more options compared to individuals with fewer perceived employment alternatives, and hence they have more information to process before they reach a decision (Payne, 1976). Complex information processing is a

cognitive task which consumes considerable effort, mental capacity and resources. Resources are further drained because individuals do not have access to all information about potential jobs which may prevent work engagement. Incomplete information is known to demand more mental effort (Schwenk, 1984) and human information-processing capacity is limited (Hardman & Macchi, 2003). Consequently, perceived employability may also increase burnout.

Second, individuals with high perceived employability may feel that they have to comply with high expectations. For example, high employable workers are expected to perform at a high level, which may use up resources and hence hinder work engagement. They may also feel pressured by their environment to pursue career success and, thus, to select the best alternative employment, to pursue this alternative and to accept only the best job opportunity possible (Dries & Pepermans, 2007; Field & Harris, 1991). Accordingly, these employees will experience the pressure to make the right decision and to obtain the 'best job'. Such pressures may also lead to psychological strain.

Third, employees who perceive many employment opportunities may tend to re-evaluate their current job in the light of potential other and better jobs. The chances of better opportunities increase considerably when perceived employability is high. It may reduce perceived fit between personal and current job characteristics. A poor fit might relate to diminished work engagement (Memon, Salleh, & Baharom, 2015) whereas a perceived misfit increases stress and subsequent burnout (French, Caplan, & Harrison, 1982).

In sum, we assume that the relationship between perceived employability and employee optimal functioning is curvilinear, so that both reduced and increased perceived employability relates to low levels of work engagement and high levels of burnout.

*Hypothesis 1:* The relationship between perceived employability and (a) vigor and (b) dedication is a reverse u-shaped curvilinear relationship, so that high and low levels of perceived employability are related to low levels of vigor and dedication.

*Hypothesis 2:* The relationship between perceived employability and (a) exhaustion and (b) cynicism is a u-shaped curvilinear relationship, so that high and low levels of perceived employability are related to high levels of exhaustion and cynicism.

## Method

### Sample

We launched a call for "participation in a study on the topic of employability" during presentations for human resource practitioners and through emails to human resource managers. Two large Belgian service organizations volunteered to participate. An invitation for the online questionnaire was sent to the employees during the spring of 2013. Because this data collection was part of a longitudinal project, data was not collected anonymously, but confidentiality of participation and data registration was guaranteed. The invitation to the employees stressed that participation was voluntary. We received 354 out of 515 questionnaires distributed in one organization (response rate: 69%) and 288 out of 369 questionnaires distributed in the other organization (response rate: 78%).

The participating Belgian organizations had Dutch- and French-speaking employees. The French-speaking participants were excluded from the analyses for methodological reasons, since the questionnaires used (e.g., perceived employability by De Cuyper and De Witte, 2008) are validated in Dutch. Moreover, the French speaking sample was too small to allow us to test accurately for invariance across the samples. The selection resulted in a total sample size of 459 respondents. Age of the respondents ranged from 21 to 64 ( $M = 40.24y$ ,  $SD = 10.50$ ). 48.6% ( $N = 223$ ) of the respondents were female. Most participants had a partner (71.2%,  $N = 327$ ) and 48.6% ( $N = 223$ ) had children. The respondents were highly educated: 29.8% ( $N = 137$ ) had a bachelor's degree, and 34.2% ( $N = 157$ ) a master's degree or PhD. Most employees worked fulltime (78.4%,  $N = 360$ ) and had a permanent contract (94.6%,  $N = 434$ ). Most employees performed a white collar job (98%,

$N = 450$ ), of whom 16% ( $N = 73$ ) were from the higher management. Tenure with the organization ranged from 1 to 43 years ( $M = 12.6$ ,  $SD = 10.74$ ).

## Measures

*Perceived employability* was measured with the four-item scale developed by De Cuyper and De Witte (2008). A sample item is: "I am optimistic that I will find another job with another employer, if I looked for one" (1 = Strongly disagree; 5 = Strongly agree; Cronbach's  $\alpha = .94$ ).

*Vigor and dedication* were both measured with items from the Dutch version of the short version of the Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (UWES, Schaufeli, Bakker, & Salanova, 2006). Each construct was measured with three items. The items were rated on a 7-point scale, ranging from 1 (*never*) to 7 (*always*). A sample item of vigor is: "At my work, I feel bursting with energy". A sample item of dedication is: "My job inspires me". Reliability (Cronbach's  $\alpha$ ) was .89 for vigor and .92 for dedication. In line with the study by Schaufeli et al. (2002) and in order to increase consistency in the use of work engagement and burnout indicators, we choose to differentiate between vigor and dedication.

*Exhaustion and cynicism* were measured with five and four items respectively, using the Dutch version of Utrecht Burnout Schaal (UBOS-A, Schaufeli & Van Dierendonck, 2000). A sample item of exhaustion is: "I feel used up at the end of a work day" (1 = never; 7 = always). The reliability (Cronbach's  $\alpha$ ) for exhaustion was .92. A sample item for cynicism is: "I doubt the significance of my work" (1 = never; 7 = always). The reliability (Cronbach's  $\alpha$ ) for cynicism was .90.

*Covariates.* Becker (2005) recommends including those control variables that correlate with the dependent variable. From the demographic variables that were included in our survey (sex, age, education level, job level, contract, and tenure), age correlated positively with both vigor and dedication; while the relationships between the other control

variables and the dependent variables (vigor, dedication, exhaustion and cynicism) were not significant. Accordingly, age was included in the analyses. This is in line with previous research which showed that differences in work engagement and burnout can be partly attributed to differences in age (e.g., Schaufeli et al., 2006).

## Analyses

We performed hierarchical linear regressions separately for vigor, dedication, exhaustion and cynicism. In the first step, age was entered. In the next step, perceived employability was entered. In the third step, the squared/quadratic or curvilinear function of perceived employability was entered. The squared term was entered in a separate step of the regression analyses, while controlling for covariates and the linear function of the independent variable (i.e. perceived employability), consistent with Cortina (1993) and Ganzach (1997). The squared component was computed based on a centered variable, consistent with Cohen, Cohen, West, and Aiken (2003). When significant, we plotted the curvilinear relationship.

## Results

The correlations are summarized in Table 1. Age correlated negatively with perceived employability ( $r = -.44$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and positively with vigor ( $r = .21$ ,  $p < .01$ ) and dedication ( $r = .14$ ,  $p < .01$ ). The correlations between perceived employability and the dependent variables were not significant. Correlations among the dependent variables were as expected: vigor correlated positively with dedication ( $r = .84$ ,  $p < .001$ ), exhaustion and cynicism correlated positively ( $r = .55$ ,  $p < .001$ ), and both vigor and dedication correlated negatively with exhaustion (relationship with vigor:  $-.48$ ,  $p < .001$ , relationship with dedication:  $-.39$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and cynicism (relationship with vigor:  $-.63$ ,  $p < .001$ , relationship with dedication:  $-.68$ ,  $p < .001$ ).

Table 1. Pearson correlations among the study variables (n = 459)

	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5
1. Age	40.24	10.50					
2. Perceived employability	3.16	.92	-.44**				
3. Vigour	5.17	1.23	.21**	.03			
4. Dedication	5.17	1.37	.14**	.09	.84**		
5. Exhaustion	2.54	1.19	.00	-.07	-.48**	-.39**	
6. Cynicism	2.31	1.26	.02	-.08	-.63**	-.68**	.55**

\*p<.05, \*\*p<.001, N ranged from 379 to 428

Table 2 summarizes results from the hierarchical regressions. Age was positively related to vigor ( $\beta = .31, p < .001$ ) and dedication ( $\beta = .25, p < .01$ ). Perceived employability was positively related to vigor ( $\beta = .16, p < .01$ ) and dedication ( $\beta = .18, p < .01$ ), while the squared term of perceived employability was neither significantly related to vigor ( $\beta = -.06, ns$ ) nor to dedication ( $\beta = -.08, ns$ ). This suggests that the relationship between perceived employability and both vigor and dedication is linear rather than curvilinear. Therefore Hypothesis 1 was rejected.

Perceived employability did not relate significantly to exhaustion ( $\beta = -.08, ns$ ) and cynicism ( $\beta = -.08, ns$ ). The squared term of perceived employability, however, did relate to exhaustion ( $\beta = .15, p < .05$ ) and cynicism ( $\beta = .13, p < .05$ ). Lower and higher levels of perceived employability related to high levels of exhaustion and cynicism, in line with Hypothesis 2. Figures 1 and 2 show the plotted relationship between perceived employability and both exhaustion and cynicism.

Table 2. Hierarchical regression analyses of the relationship between perceived employability (PE) and vigor, dedication, exhaustion, and cynicism (n = 459)

	Vigor			Dedication			Exhaustion			Cynicism		
	Step 1	Step 2	Step 3	Step 1	Step 2	Step 3	Step 1	Step 2	Step 3	Step 1	Step 2	Step 3
Age	.23***	.30***	.31***	.15*	.23**	.25**	-.02	-.06	-.09	-.01	-.05	-.08
PE		.16**	.16**		.18*	.18*		-.10	-.08		-.10	-.08
PE <sup>2</sup>			-.06			-.08			.15**			.13*
R <sup>2</sup>	.05***	.07***	.08***	.02**	.05**	.06***	.00	.01	.03**	.00	.01	.02*
R <sup>2</sup> change		.02**	.00		.03**	.01		.01	.02**		.01	.02*

\*p<.05, \*\*p<.01, \*\*\*p<.001

PE = Perceived employability

Other demographic variables (level of education, temporary versus permanent contract, tenure, and part-time versus fulltime employment) did not significantly change the results. Controlling for the level of job insecurity did also not significantly change the results.

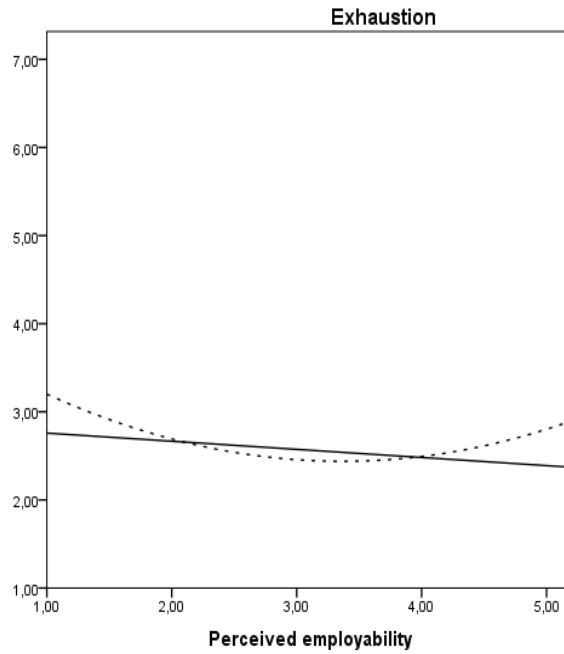


Figure 1. Curve estimations of the relationship between perceived employability and exhaustion.

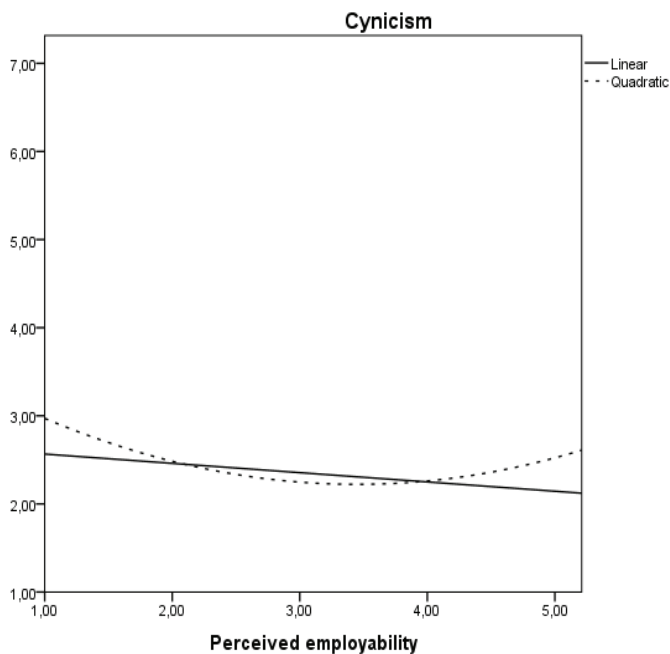


Figure 2. Curve estimations of the relationship between perceived employability and cynicism.

### Discussion

This study aimed to advance understanding of the relationship between perceived employability and employee optimal

functioning. Innovative in this study is that we accounted for curvilinear relationships. We established that the relationships between perceived employability and employee

optimal functioning were different for both dimensions of employee optimal functioning.

We found a positive, linear association between perceived employability and both indicators of work engagement (e.g., vigor and dedication), when controlling for age. Perceived employability seems to act as a motivator because perceived employability gives employees a sense of control; the employee has the feeling that he or she can act on the situation because of perceived employment opportunities. Note, however, that we initially did not find a significant zero-order correlation between perceived employability and vigor and dedication. We only found a positive, linear association between perceived employability and vigor and dedication after controlling for age. Because this effect was only found after controlling for age, this reflects a suppression effect. We may understand this suppression effect through two mechanisms: (a) there is a positive direct effect of age on work engagement due to a 'healthy worker' or selection-effect (i.e. only healthy employees stay, Parker & Kulik, 1995), and (b) there is an indirect effect of age on work engagement through perceived employability: older workers perceive themselves as less employable as a reaction to, for example, age stereotyping (e.g., Van der Heijden, de Lange, Demerouti, & Van der Heijde, 2009) and perceived employability is critical to feel engaged. Accordingly, the positive relationship between perceived employability and work engagement may show only when controlling for age.

Next, we established a curvilinear relationship between perceived employability and indicators of burnout (e.g., exhaustion and cynicism). Employees with a (very) low or (very) high level of perceived employability seem to experience higher levels of exhaustion and cynicism. The association between low perceived employability and high levels of burnout ties in with the view of a positive association between perceived employability and optimal functioning as discussed in the introduction (e.g., a negative association between perceived employability and burnout). We advanced three arguments for this type of association. First, lack of alternatives limits freedom of employees and generates anxiety for job loss, which can lead to increased cynicism and exhaustion. Second,

few employment alternatives may create feelings of lack of control (De Cuyper et al., 2008) which also relate to burnout. And third, employees with low levels of perceived employability are more likely to be in jobs of lower quality (e.g., unsatisfying jobs with higher levels of workload) which also relates to burnout. The association between high perceived employability and high levels of burnout relates to the curvilinear argumentation mentioned above. High perceived employability demands more mental effort from the employee which is linked to more social pressure and may relate to a re- and underevaluation of the current job, which also relates to burnout. We notice a different relationship between perceived employability and both 'types' of outcomes (i.e. indicators of work engagement versus indicators of burnout). A potential reason may be that investments in (perceived) employability have two motivations (i.e. the 'why' of behavior according to Self-Determination Theory, see Van den Broeck, Vansteenkiste, & De Witte, 2008): (a) employees may want to invest in their employability because of an autonomous or intrinsic reason (e.g., they want to gain control over their career), which leads to a positive process: very high levels of autonomous motivation increase positive outcomes; and (b) employees may want to invest in their employability due to a controlled or extrinsic cause (e.g., they want to live up to expectations of others), which becomes negative when it surpasses the autonomous motivation (Van den Broeck et al., 2008). We would recommend researchers to include the motivation of shaping one's perceived employability (i.e. 'why') in future research as this may have different outcomes.

The implications for practitioners lie in the identification of precarious target groups. Individuals with a low level of perceived employability may feel locked in their profession, which relates to high levels of burnout and low levels of work engagement. Career counseling may help these individuals find employment opportunities or it may also help them adopt a focus on transferable or wide competencies that are applicable to other jobs. A possible suggestion for employers would be to create more (future) employment

opportunities (e.g., job rotation, promotions). On the other side, employees with a very high level of perceived employability experience high levels of work engagement, but, at the same time, they seem to be a precarious target group in that they experience exhaustion and cynicism at work. Employers may want to help these employees by providing them with opportunities for career counseling or coaching. This could help these employees to specify their career goal which would narrow down the perceived employment alternatives.

### Limitations

In this study, we wanted to test the curvilinear relationships between perceived employability and two dimensions of employee optimal functioning due to modest empirical evidence for the linear relationship. We want to note that the explained variance is limited in our study, but that curvilinear associations seem to add to the understanding of the relationship between perceived employability and employee optimal functioning. A second limitation relates to causality; the findings of this study did not provide evidence concerning the direction of causality, due to a cross-sectional design. However, previous longitudinal evidence suggests that perceived employability has an effect on subsequent employee health (e.g., Berntson & Marklund, 2007). A third limitation of this study relates to the sample. The sample consisted of highly educated employees. This may limit the generalizability of the results. We encourage future studies to check for curvilinear associations between perceived employability and employee optimal functioning with, for example, unemployed individuals in order to test the generalizability of our results. A fourth limitation lies in the data-collection and use of self-ratings of employees which might imply common method bias (Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Lee, & Podsakoff, 2003). In order to avoid common method variance or bias, we included different scale types in the questionnaire and the scales were alternately placed with related scales. We also aimed to prevent social desirable answers by framing participation as voluntary and confidential. As it appears to be hard for participants to simulate curvilinear effects

(Podsakoff et al., 2003) we are confident that the impact of social desirability is limited.

### Conclusion

The aim of this study was to test for curvilinear relationships between perceived employability and two dimensions of employee optimal functioning. We found a positive, linear relationship between perceived employability and vigor and dedication and a curvilinear relationship between perceived employability and exhaustion and cynicism. In conclusion, perceived employability can relate to higher levels of work engagement, but also relate to higher levels of burnout. While previous research framed perceived employability as a positive phenomenon, the curvilinear relationship between perceived employability and burnout indicates a negative side to perceived employability. We encourage researchers to test for curvilinear relationships because they seem to add to the understanding of the relationship between perceived employability and employee optimal functioning, and especially, because some relationships may be underestimated when only linear relationships are examined.

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