

Editorial

What about the Factor Time in Sustainable Employability Research? An Overview of Theory-Based Organizational Research

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Abstract: To facilitate new knowledge development about *temporal perspectives on the topic of sustainable employability* from an organizational perspective, in this Special Issue, we present new meaningful results of eight different empirical papers. Of these accepted papers, three studies were based on longitudinal survey data (2-wave panel data, whereas one study included cross-sectional survey data). Two studies included interview data (semi-structured interviews versus life-span retrospective interviews). The other two accepted papers included secondary data analyses (secondary fiscal data versus content bibliographical data). The accepted research included a variety of indicators of sustainable employability, such as subjective competency-based measures of internal employability versus objective sustained employment and included data from different occupational contexts in Europe (three studies included Dutch data), Egypt, China and Korea. In this editorial, we discussed the lessons learned from these papers in greater detail and presented a research agenda for future research on temporal perspectives on the concept of sustainable employability.

Keywords: sustainable employability; temporal perspectives; longitudinal research



Citation: De Lange, A.H.;

Kooij, D.T.A.M.; Furunes, T. What about the Factor Time in Sustainable Employability Research? An Overview of Theory-Based Organizational Research. *Sustainability* **2022**, *14*, 10730.

<https://doi.org/10.3390/su141710730>

Received: 21 August 2022

Accepted: 23 August 2022

Published: 29 August 2022

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1. Introduction

Many organizations face challenges in their workforce planning and staffing due to societal trends such as the greying of the workforce and the war for fewer talents in the labour market. These challenges stimulate employers to find new ways of attracting and retaining new personnel to ensure sustainable employability in their organization. It is, therefore, not surprising that the research interest in the topic of sustainable employability has increased significantly in the past decade [1–4]. Alcover and colleagues argue that sustainable employability [5] refers to: “dynamic elements that influence an individual’s ability to sustainably maintain employability, health, and well-being throughout the working life” (p. 158). Furthermore, Fleuren and colleagues [6] refer to the importance of conceptualizing and measuring the factor time in research on sustainable employability [6] and criticize earlier research for lacking a temporal perspective in their theory-building, conceptualization and measures of the concept. Besides temporal aspects, scholars also pointed to the multi-dimensional nature of the concept [1,4,5,7–11], referring to micro-, meso- and macro-level aspects of sustainable employability and subjective competence-based measures versus more labour market-based measures to conceptualize and measure sustainable employability.

Given this diversity in employability research, different conceptualizations, operationalizations (e.g., different indicators) and theoretical underpinnings are used in earlier research [4]. For example, building upon the Conservation of Resources (COR) theory [12,13],

employability can be perceived as personal resources that enable individuals to cope with challenging situations [14,15] to promote well-being and career success [16], while based upon Social Exchange Theory (SET), employability has also been defined as being a responsibility of the individual as well as their organization [17]. Another example concerns Amartya Sen's capability approach [10], which proposes that workers can acquire relevant capabilities throughout their working lives (i.e., learning relevant skills and knowledge, developing meaningful relations, etc. [11]) that can affect their career development and outcomes. The larger a worker's capabilities reservoir, the more resilient and sustainably employable the worker can become. Another (micro- and meso-level) theoretical perspective on sustainable employability builds on Appelbaum's theory of Ability, Motivation and Opportunity [9], which postulates that sustainable employability is the result of the interaction between the workers' abilities, motivation and the opportunities provided for learning and growth within their work environment to extend their working lives [18]. In sum, theories in this research field can focus on micro-, meso- or macro-level based antecedents of the concept of sustainable employability [2] or present more macro-level process-based theories that can be labelled as integrative and multi-layered perspectives of the concept of sustainable employability [7].

Surprisingly few longitudinal studies have been published, including temporal perspectives, on relations between environmental factors and the sustainable employability of workers in organizations [1,4]. Most studies are based on cross-sectional research, and the concepts under study are mostly considered to be static concepts [4,6]. However, in practice, both people and their jobs are subject to changes over time. As a result, it remains unclear how developments in different micro-, meso-, or macro-level environmental antecedents can affect indicators of sustainable employability across time and how researchers can best design studies on sustainable employability that effectively address the (influence of the) factor time.

2. The Current Issue

To facilitate new knowledge development about *temporal perspectives on the topic of sustainable employability* from an organizational perspective, in this Special Issue, we called for new empirical work and organizational research to provide meaningful new insights on the role of time in relation to sustainable employability. In total, eight papers were accepted [19–26]. Of these accepted papers, three studies (37.5%) were based on longitudinal survey data (2-wave panel data; [19–21]), whereas one study included cross-sectional survey data ([22]; 12.5%). Two studies included interview data (25%; semi-structured interviews versus life-span retrospective interviews; [23,24]). The other two accepted papers included secondary data analyses (25%; secondary fiscal data versus content bibliographical data; [25,26]). The accepted research papers included different conceptualizations and theoretical approaches to sustainable employability. More particularly, sustainable employability was conceptualized as subjective or objective career success (e.g., future occupational ranking, unemployment), competence-based internal employability, extended work availability, % of regular employees (similar to employees with a permanent contract), labour inclusion, and extended working time. The theoretical approaches used were the self-regulation theory, including the Selection, Optimization, and Compensation model and the socio-emotional selectivity theory, the sustainable careers framework, job design theories, social capital theory, the Conservation of Resources model, spill over theory, and corporate social responsibility/marketing frameworks. The papers included data from different occupational contexts (e.g., healthcare, education, and hotel industry) in Europe (62.5%; 3 studies included Dutch data), Egypt, China and Korea. We first discuss these papers in greater detail and then present a research agenda for future research, including temporal perspectives on the concept of sustainable employability.

The Special Issue includes a longitudinal survey study by Pak and colleagues on relations between age discrimination, ageing and internal employability in a healthcare context [1]. More specifically, they examined (a) the causal direction of the relationship

between age discrimination and internal employability and (b) differences between age groups (young (≤ 30), middle-aged (31–44), and older (≥ 45) healthcare workers) in this relationship. Based on the Selection Optimization Compensation theory, Pak et al. (2022) [19] examined these relations using a 2-wave complete panel study among 1478 Dutch healthcare professionals. The results of the multi-group structural equation modelling analyses suggested that internal employability is a significant negative predictor of age discrimination, indicating that perceiving fewer opportunities for mobility within healthcare institutions is related to greater levels of age discrimination. Moreover, the results suggested that internal employability and age discrimination have a reciprocal relationship among older workers but seem to be unrelated for younger and middle-aged workers. As a result, this study revealed that more preventive measures for older workers are needed to facilitate their employability levels across time and that the factor time indeed plays a role in relations between internal employability and age discrimination which are reciprocal over time among older workers leading to less opportunities at work among older workers over time.

Zhang and colleagues developed and examined relations between time-based antecedents and perceived extended work availability (EWA). EWA captures the experience of an employee needing to be available for job demands during nonworking hours. Given that EWA has a close connection with time-based work–nonwork conflict, this cross-sectional survey study addressed the question using a temporal perspective and focused on the impact of three time-related determinants or antecedents of employee EWA, namely the influence of (a) temporal leadership or time management behaviour of leaders, (b) the individual tendency to delay an intended course of action (i.e., procrastination) and (c) the time management environment in an organization (i.e., organizational time norms) in relation to EWA. Drawing on spillover theory and using a cross-sectional survey among a sample of 240 full-time Chinese employees, Zhang et al. (2022) [22] showed that temporal leadership had a U-shaped association with employee EWA, meaning that a moderately strong temporal leadership alleviates employee EWA. Furthermore, employee procrastination and organizational time norms were significantly positively related to employee EWA, respectively. Moreover, the U-shaped association between temporal leadership and employee EWA becomes more salient when the organizational time norm is strong. These findings contribute to a more comprehensive view of how managers can alleviate employee EWA in today's ICT-prevalent work environment [4] and show the importance of temporal measures in explaining meaningful work behaviour.

Hakanen and colleagues (2021) also examined time-related measures in relation to sustainable employability, but in this case, focused more on macro-level collected data using time-based measures as an outcome of sustainable employability instead of a determinant [20]. More specifically, using insights from the Conservation of Resources (COR) theory and the sustainable careers framework, the aim of this study was to investigate whether work engagement predicts register-based outcomes of wages, moves in occupational rankings, unemployment, and disability pensions. Hakanen et al. (2021) [20] used nationally representative longitudinal survey data ($n = 4876$; response rate 68.7%) of Finnish employees, collected from 2013–2015. After controlling for outcomes at baseline and several covariates, e.g., health. Hakanen et al. (2021) [20] found that work engagement significantly positively predicted future wages and the probability of rising in occupational rankings and negatively predicted future unemployment and disability pensions across time. This study extended the scope of the possible benefits of work engagement for employees, organizations, and society at large and contributed to career research by indicating the importance of work engagement for objectively measured indicators of sustainable careers using a longitudinal perspective and design.

The longitudinal, quantitative study of Habets and colleagues [21] examined the extent to which a learning (LinkedIn) intervention in a university setting affects an individual's social media use for professional development and the extent to which this relates to self-reported employability. Furthermore, they investigated how this relationship was

possibly moderated by an individual's motivation to communicate through social media (LinkedIn). Based on social capital theory and the Conservation of Resources theory, Habets et al. (2021) [21] developed a set of hypotheses that were tested based on longitudinal data collected from Egyptian university employees ($n = 101$) working in middle- and higher-level jobs. First, in line with their hypotheses, the results showed that social media use for professional development was significantly higher after learning intervention than before. Second, partially in line with their expectations, social media use for professional development was significantly positively related to the employability dimension anticipation and optimization. Third, contrary to the hypotheses, motivation to communicate through social media (LinkedIn) did not have a moderating role in this relationship. In sum, the learning intervention revealed the potential to foster social media use for professional development and, in turn, to contribute to individuals' human capital in terms of their across-time development of competence-based levels of employability.

The study of Cruz-Morato [25] examined the influence of so-called Special Employment Centres (SEC) in Spain on the sustained employment of people with disabilities (PWD) working in the hotel industry. A content bibliographic analysis was carried out using the ProKnow-C methodology. The analyses revealed few studies examining the influence of SEC on the sustained employment of PWD workers. The scarce research available indicated two different groups of papers focusing on the supply versus the demand side; with the supply side papers focusing on the influence of HR practices which make PWD inclusion possible as well as the influence of managers' perceptions of workers with disabilities that affects their chances of sustained employment. According to the bibliographic portfolio, the presence of labour discrimination in the regular labour market is more evident; and, in the long term, the following two opposite situations could be happening simultaneously: (a) SEC would be reinforcing the social stigma, hindering the labour situation of PWD; (b) SEC could be changing the social perspectives of clients and all society in a positive manner. Therefore, Cruz et al. (2021) [25] called for research that incorporates an innovative Corporate Social Marketing approach in order to shed new light on this issue and improve the effective sustainable employment of PWD across time.

The aim of the qualitative interview study of Den Boer and colleagues [24] was to investigate how job type (operational, professional and managerial jobs) influences older workers' job characteristics needs to continue working. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 21 older (55+) Dutch employees working in the health and education sector. A full thematic analysis of interview transcripts was performed, and work characteristics were identified, coded, categorized and compared to discover patterns of similarities and differences between job types. The results showed that job types have a number of work characteristics in common, including that operational job types share autonomy with managers and client interaction with professionals, and professionals and managers share mentorship. Unique work characteristics for operational roles are supervisor support and a comfortable workspace. Professionals especially want to use their expertise and flexible working hours (more distal work characteristics to use across time), and managers are different because they value personal development and contact with colleagues. In conclusion, the results show that older workers prefer different types of future jobs, depending on the type of job of the ageing employee.

Hupkens and colleagues [23] adopted a retrospective life-span approach to careers and qualitative interviews to examine how patterns in perceptions of subjective career success and priorities may change over time among a sample of 63 Dutch professionals. The temporal development of subjective career success was explored among early career, mid-career, and late-career workers by piecing together retrospective evaluations of career success perceptions. The findings of this study point to common patterns in career success perceptions across the lifespan. Specifically, Hupkens and colleagues found five meaningful shift components of career success perceptions during people's careers, namely (1) quitting striving for financial success and recognition; (2) an increased focus on personal development across the career; (3) a stronger emphasis on work-life balance across the career;

(4) a shift toward being of service to others; and (5) no change in subjective career success components across the career. These patterns reflect ways in which workers engage in motivational self-regulation and their corresponding career goal-setting across the lifespan and point to the diversity of temporal changes in career perceptions and self-regulation across the lifespan.

Finally, the aim of the secondary data analysis study of Rhee and colleagues [26] was to examine the effect of Corporate social responsibility activities on sustainable employability across time. Fiscal data from a sample of listed firms in Korea from the 2012 to 2017 fiscal years were used. The authors obtained financial statement information from the KisValue database and employment data from the TS2000 database. This process yielded a final sample of 3802 firm-year observations from KOSPI-listed companies. Rhee et al. (2021) [26] judged regular employment with a guaranteed retirement age to be sustainable employability. Therefore, they measured the level of sustainable employability by the number of regular employees out of the total number of employees and then examined the effect of CSR activities on sustainable employability. From the empirical results, they found that firms engaging in CSR activities have and maintain higher sustainable employability than firms who are not engaging in CSR activities. They also found that the companies engaging in a high CSR index score showed greater sustainable employability than those with a low CSR index score. The results of this study suggest a way to increase sustainability in terms of employment by supporting a rational basis for companies to adopt CSR.

3. Research Agenda Future Research

The diversity in the conceptualizations and operationalizations of sustainable employability used in the included studies suggests that there is still little consensus on the conceptualization and operationalization of sustainable employability. We, therefore, iterate earlier calls and urge future research to provide more conceptual clarity on sustainable employability and its indicators. Such future studies could build on the theories and frameworks used in this Special Issue. As the included studies suggest, the literature on relations between individual and environmental factors and sustainable employability is also limited in the sense that few theories explicitly address or hypothesize about the factor of time or time perspective in relation to sustainable employability. Theories such as the socio-emotional selectivity theory [27], construal level theory [28], and temporal motivation theory [29] could therefore add to our understanding of how sustainable employability actually develops across time and which micro-level (e.g., ageing, time perspective, learning opportunities at work), meso-level (e.g., temporal leadership, organizational time norms) or macro-level factors (e.g., age discrimination, sector-specific developments) influence stability or change in reported sustainability employability scores in organizations.

For example, the interview study of Hupkens and colleagues [23] showed that the motivational theory of life-span development [5], socio-emotional selectivity theory [9], and work-related motives [10] could provide relevant explanations for the mechanisms behind developmental patterns in career success among different age groups. This study thus shows how time-related theories such as the motivational theory of life-span development can help transform subjective career success (from the career success literature) from a static to a more dynamic outcome that evolves over the course of a career. Moreover, new time-based measures such as temporal leadership and organizational time norms seem to explain meaningful differences in indicators of sustainable employability and therefore deserve more theoretical as well as empirical research attention. As a result, future research can provide the following:

- (1) Integrate the fragmented literature on (indicators of) sustainable employability with an aim to achieve more consensus on conceptualizations and operationalizations of sustainable employability (see also [9]).
- (2) Include meaningful time-based measures in the research by examining relations between antecedents and indicators of sustainable employability (i.e., future time perspective, temporal leadership and organizational time norms [22]).
- (3) Theorize further on the time-based dimensions in, or temporal perspectives

on, different relations between micro-, meso- and macro-level antecedents and indicators of sustainable employability. (4) Use more advanced multi-wave complete panel designs (i.e., based on longitudinal surveys, diary studies) to further disentangle the effects of ageing, time or cohort in relations between antecedents and indicators of sustainable employability. (5) Develop systematic reviews or meta-analyses on longitudinal relations between different types of micro-, meso- or macro-level antecedents of sustainable employability to provide more in-depth analyses on possible effects of ageing, time or cohort in explaining across-time changes in sustainable employability. In line with our first suggestion, we agree with the recommendation of van Harten and colleagues [1] to start from more consistent measured indicators of sustainable employability and further examine when, for whom, and why those instruments revealed meaningful evidence across time.

The overview of the eight accepted studies and their findings showed the complexity of the multi-faceted and time-related nature of the concept of sustainable employability and indicates that future research requires new interdisciplinary collaboration in designing theories and more advanced research designs that are sensitive to contextual and time-based differences on the micro (e.g., self-regulation), the meso (e.g., organizational time norms), and the macro-level (e.g., age discrimination). It also shows the need for a variety of methodologies to further examine meaningful developmental or time-based processes in sustainable employability across time. Nonetheless, the current Special Issue showed that the factor of time is a topic that is viable and relevant for further addressal in new sustainable employability research.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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