

8-6-2024

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Recommended Citation

Donald, William E.; Van der Heijden, Beatrice I.J.M.; and Manville, Graham, "(Re)Framing sustainable careers: toward a conceptual model and future research agenda" (2024). *All Works*. 6677.
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(Re)Framing sustainable careers: toward a conceptual model and future research agenda

Career
Development
International

513

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Received 14 February 2024

Revised 6 March 2024

Accepted 6 March 2024

Abstract

Purpose – By adopting a Social Exchange Theory (SET) lens, this paper aims to integrate the often-fragmented literature streams of Vocational Behavior (VB), Career Development (CD), and Human Resource Management (HRM) to offer a conceptual model for framing sustainable careers.

Design/methodology/approach – A conceptual approach is taken whereby eight propositions are developed to integrate the fragmented literature streams of VB, CD, and HRM.

Findings – We posit that external factors and career counseling moderate the positive relationship between employability capital and self-perceived employability. We also argue that self-perceived employability is positively associated with career success and that career crafting moderates this relationship. Finally, we propose that career success is positively associated with a sustainable career, which, in turn, is positively associated with a sustainable organization.

Practical implications – The practical contribution comes from informing VB, CD, and HRM policies and practices to maximize sustainable outcomes for individuals and organizations. The paper concludes with recommendations for future research.

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The authors would like to thank the Editor-in-Chief, Senior Editor and the anonymous peer reviewers. The authors would also like to thank the Human Resource Management division of the British Academy of Management for earlier feedback and the award of the best paper for the division at the 2023 conference.

Funding: No funds, grants, or other support were received.

Ethical approval: Not applicable as this is a conceptual paper.

Consent: Not applicable as this is a conceptual paper.

Data availability statement: Not applicable as there is no data set associated with this manuscript.

Competing interests: The authors have no relevant financial or non-financial interests to disclose.



Career Development International

Vol. 29 No. 5, 2024

pp. 513-526

Emerald Publishing Limited

1362-0436

DOI 10.1108/CDI-02-2024-0073

Originality/value – The theoretical contribution comes from integrating the three literature streams to offer a conceptual model as the basis for further interdisciplinary collaborations.

Keywords Career development, Human resource management, Sustainable careers, Sustainable organizations, Vocational behavior

Paper type Conceptual paper

Introduction

The Vocational Behavior (VB), Career Development (CD), and Human Resource Management (HRM) literature streams traditionally evolved separately, with minimal integration of ideas, concepts, or theories (Baruch and Sullivan, 2022; Healy *et al.*, 2022). This approach is problematic given that these literature streams often share similar objectives. For example, employability capital (Donald *et al.*, 2024) and career success (Spurk *et al.*, 2019) represent central tenets. The Vocational Behavior (VB) literature is dominated by research promoting self-efficacy, career agency, and proactive behaviors as strategies to enable individuals to enhance their employability, develop resilience, and navigate uncertainty across their careers (Blustein *et al.*, 2020; Smale *et al.*, 2019). The CD literature often acts as a bridge between individuals, contextual factors, and career counseling (Hirschi *et al.*, 2022; Mehlhouse *et al.*, 2023; Stevenson *et al.*, 2022), whereas the HRM literature naturally focuses more on talent management strategies for organizations (Rodrigues *et al.*, 2020; Tzabbar *et al.*, 2017; Ybema *et al.*, 2020).

An emerging interest is the conceptualization of sustainable careers (e.g. De Vos *et al.*, 2020; Donald *et al.*, 2020; Fugate *et al.*, 2021; Huang *et al.*, 2019; Nimmi *et al.*, 2022; Van der Heijden and De Vos, 2015; Van der Heijden *et al.*, 2020; Ybema *et al.*, 2020). Sustainable careers capture the interplay over time between individual and contextual factors (De Vos *et al.*, 2020; Fugate *et al.*, 2021). Such a view posits that employability is malleable and that CD intervention can enhance the personal resources of employees (Huang *et al.*, 2019; Nimmi *et al.*, 2022). Furthermore, chance events such as the COVID-19 pandemic have highlighted how uncertainty via unforeseen circumstances can cause career shocks and dramatically impact contemporary labor markets (Akkermans *et al.*, 2021). The pandemic also triggered a “The Great Resignation” as individuals sought a sense of purpose following restrictions and disruption. Consequently, enhancing workers’ employability has become a central tenant of HRM (Cooke *et al.*, 2021). There has also been recent interest in using sustainable career theory to bridge graduate and worker employability research (Akkermans *et al.*, 2024).

Additionally, workers’ employability and their career sustainability are far more complex than whether they are currently employed. There is a dynamic interplay of written and psychological contracts (Rousseau, 1995) between employees (in terms of fulfilling their jobs) and employers (in terms of competitive advantage) that play out within a career ecosystem (Baruch and Rousseau, 2019; Donald, 2023a). The sustainable career and career ecosystems theory have recently been combined into sustainable career ecosystems (Donald, 2023b). Therefore, employers’ strategic investment in CD and HRM, and opportunities for career agency and career progression at the employee level, can benefit both parties (Fugate *et al.*, 2021; Rodrigues *et al.*, 2020).

To do justice to the complex nature of the phenomena of employability and career sustainability, we adopt a Social Exchange Theory (SET; Blau, 1964) lens to further our comprehension of the mutual dependence between employees and their employers and the dynamics of interactions between them (cf. Fugate *et al.*, 2021). In doing so, we aim to integrate the often-fragmented literature streams of VB, CD, and HRM to offer an integrated conceptual model for framing sustainable careers. Eight propositions are systematically developed to evidence how VB, CD, and HRM interventions can promote sustainable careers at the individual level and organizational performance via increased creativity, productivity, and competitive advantage (Branicki *et al.*, 2019; Hirudayaraj and Matic, 2021; Van der Heijden, 2005; Ybema *et al.*, 2020).

The theoretical contribution of this scholarly work comes from our conceptual model combining the VB, CD, and HRM literature streams and integrating these by adopting a SET

lens. Our approach incorporates the three dimensions of a sustainable career, including person, context, and time (De Vos *et al.*, 2020). We advocate that whilst an individual (*person*) is the central career holder, it is the quality of the interaction (or dynamic exchange relationship) with their organization (*context*) over time (*time*) that ultimately determines the outcomes of the exchange relationship. By recognizing that employees and their organizations engage in a series of interdependent interactions wherein both parties benefit from these exchanges (Baruch and Rousseau, 2019), our practical contribution comes from informing CD and HRM policies and practices to maximize sustainable outcomes for both parties.

Our focus now shifts to developing a set of eight propositions and a conceptual model intended to form the basis for future empirical research. This paper concludes by evidencing the implications offered by our new model and future research opportunities.

Integrative conceptual model development

Employability capital and self-perceived employability

The three most highly cited models of different forms of employability capital were all published online in 2017, although the in-print publication dates vary (Clarke, 2018; Donald *et al.*, 2019; Tomlinson, 2017). However, each model has typically evolved independently, with varying emphasis placed on different aspects of each model influenced by the literature stream (Römgens *et al.*, 2020). Consequently, the conceptualization of employability capital remained inconclusive (Peeters *et al.*, 2019). To address this, Donald *et al.* (2024) conducted a systematic literature review whereby qualitative analysis of a final cohort of 94 manuscripts led to a new Employability Capital Growth Model (ECGM). Table 1 summarizes the nine forms of employability capital presented in their model.

Self-perceived employability refers to how individuals perceive their potential to secure or retain employment opportunities (Vanhercke *et al.*, 2014, p. 594). From a SET perspective, employability capital can be reflective of the employability paradox seen in human capital, whereby task-specific capital is often viewed as more beneficial to the individual, whilst firm-specific human capital is often regarded as more advantageous to the organization (De Cuyper and De Witte, 2011). However, organizations that signal the value of their employees by investing in opportunities to develop various forms of employability capital in both task-specific and firm-specific ways are likely to retain their talent since employees are more inclined to remain with an organization that invests in CD opportunities (Rodrigues *et al.*, 2020; cf. the Strategic Employability Architecture framework by Fugate *et al.*, 2021).

Empirical studies have indicated a positive association between the development of various forms of employability capital and self-perceived employability in university students (e.g. Tomlinson, 2017), young professionals (e.g. Nimmi *et al.*, 2022) and across the career span (Gubbins and Dooley, 2021). The reflective dimension of career ownership can also lead to increased optimism (Chui *et al.*, 2022) and adaptability (Son, 2018) by motivating an individual to commit to lifewide and lifelong learning (Cole and Coulson, 2022; Cole and Donald, 2022). Based on the premise that accumulating personal resources via employability capital equips an individual to meet higher individual-driven and employer-driven demands, which translates into increased self-perceived employability, we propose:

Proposition 1 (P1). Employability capital is positively related to self-perceived employability.

External factors

The VB literature has tended to emphasize the role of agency in increasing one's self-perceived employability (e.g. Blustein *et al.*, 2020; Smale *et al.*, 2019). However, circumstances beyond the control of an individual have only recently begun to receive similar levels of

ID	Theme	Definition
1	Social Capital	The resources an individual gains via establishing and nurturing relationships through networks with various other individuals and groups, leading to enhanced self-perceived employability via an understanding of values, norms, and practices
2	Cultural Capital	The influence of the situations experienced by an individual leading to the accumulation of culturally valued knowledge to determine one's self-perceived employability and functionality within the labor market
3	Psychological Capital	The characteristics of an individual that determine 'who you are', building on social cognitive theory and positive psychology, to offer a personal resource for enhancing self-perceived employability and navigating volatile and global labor market environments
4	Personal Identity Capital	How prospective employers and others judge an individual based on their background and the associated signals they present. Personal identity capital can enhance or detract from other forms of capital, but an individual's agency is restricted by external systems
5	Health Capital	An accumulation (or lack) of resources related to the mental and physical state of an individual, including health dimensions within and outside of their control that impact their self-perceived employability and ability to perform a job
6	Scholastic Capital	The resources from pre-university education, university education, and additional professional qualifications that cumulatively determine self-perceived employability
7	Market-Value Capital	The cumulative resources from experiences gained from the labor market combined with technical and personal skills that determine self-perceived employability
8	Career Identity Capital	The cumulative resources from engaging in reflective practices, seeking career counseling, and adopting personal agency to increase one's ability to signal their self-perceived employability to prospective employers
9	Economic Capital	An individual's access (or lack of) to material resources and the associated money that can be generated directly or indirectly from these resources to enhance one's self-perceived employability

Table 1.
Nine forms of
employability capital

Source(s): Authors work, [Donald et al. \(2024\)](#), p. 7

attention ([Clarke, 2018](#); [Van der Heijden and De Vos, 2015](#)). External factors are those beyond an individual's direct control (agency), capturing the idea of employability being contingent ([Donald et al., 2024](#), p. 7).

Examples of external factors can include bias in the recruitment process ([Donald et al., 2024](#)) or career shocks ([Akkermans et al., 2021](#)). In these cases, the external factor can either have a positive or a negative effect. Bias in the recruitment process can unfairly advantage or disadvantage an individual's chances of securing an offer of employment. An unexpected promotion could be a positive career shock (at least initially), whilst unexpected redundancy could be a negative career shock (again, at least initially), as what initially seems like a positive or negative career shock can also turn out to be the opposite type of career shock over time ([Akkermans et al., 2021](#)). Consequently, we propose the following:

Proposition 2 (P2). External factors moderate the relationship between employability capital and self-perceived employability in such a way that positive external influences increase the strength of this relationship. In contrast, negative external influences decrease the strength of this relationship.

Career counseling

Career counseling can support an individual in balancing capacity and challenge ([Neault and Pickerell, 2011](#)) and in identifying purpose, values, and strengths ([Gupta, 2019](#)) (cf. the

anticipation and optimization dimension of the employability operationalization by Van der Heijde and Van der Heijden, 2006). Early intervention and ongoing support throughout one's life can foster self-efficacy, enabling an individual to effectively navigate unexpected challenges (e.g. career shocks) and chance events when they inevitably occur, leading to sustainable outcomes for employees and employers (Donald and Manville, 2023). However, career counseling resources in educational environments are often limited, resulting in calls for win-win partnerships whereby organizations work with educational institutions to support their students, positioning education as an antecedent to career sustainability (Buckholtz and Donald, 2022; Donald *et al.*, 2022).

Moreover, CD and HRM interventions, such as career counseling, are most effective when they combine individual and organizational levels and prioritize structural over one-off interventions (van Woerkom, 2021). Organizations that support goal setting through valuable interventions, such as career counseling activities, can also help individuals decrease stress and increase performance at work (Weintraub *et al.*, 2021). Furthermore, when organizations offer employees access to mindfulness and career counseling resources, the employee's perception of their personal resources can be enhanced, enabling them from VB and CD perspectives to increase their self-efficacy, improve their work engagement, and enhance authentic functioning (Bakker, 2017).

As such, following the notion of SET (Blau, 1964), career counseling can provide the resource passageway for further operationalization and valorization of these resources (Nimmi *et al.*, 2022) and facilitate individuals in translating them into employability development as the basis for sustainable careers and organizations. Specifically, De Vos *et al.* (2011) found that organizational support for developing competencies and an organizational culture that supports individual development enhances workers' self-perceived employability. Consequently, we propose the following:

Proposition 3 (P3). Access to and engagement with career counseling is positively related to self-perceived employability.

Proposition 4 (P4). Career counseling moderates the positive relationship between employability capital and self-perceived employability, such that this relationship is stronger when access to and engagement with career counseling is higher.

Career success

A career captures the unfolding sequence of one's work experiences over time (Arthur *et al.*, 1989), whereby career success combines objective and subjective dimensions (Arthur *et al.*, 2005; Mirvis and Hall, 1994; Spurk *et al.*, 2019). Career success has become a dominant topic in the CD literature [as evidenced by Mehlhouse *et al.*'s (2023) literature review of publications in the Journal of Career Development]. Objective career success focuses on aspects of success that can be measured and observed based on standardized measures and social comparisons (Arthur *et al.*, 2005). In contrast, subjective career success addresses personally desirable success based on one's own evaluation of achieving meaningful career outcomes (Mirvis and Hall, 1994). Career success as a combined construct of objective and subjective dimensions can incorporate salary, occupational prestige, job performance, career satisfaction, emotional wellbeing, and flourishing (Spurk *et al.*, 2019).

Self-perceived employability can increase the likelihood of career success (De Vos *et al.*, 2011; Frederiksen and Kato, 2018; Haenggli *et al.*, 2021). For example, resilience has been linked to increased wellbeing and beneficial HRM outcomes as employees are better equipped to adapt to threats and overcome adversities (Liu *et al.*, 2019; Nimmi *et al.*, 2022). Self-perceived employability is likely to significantly influence career success as the length of a career continues to increase along with the occurrences of chance events (e.g. pandemics,

wars, climate change), career shocks, and technological advancement (Akkermans *et al.*, 2021; Amankwah-Amoah *et al.*, 2021; Donald *et al.*, 2023). Consequently, we propose the following:

Proposition 5 (P5). Self-perceived employability is positively related to objective career success (P5a) and subjective career success (P5b).

Career crafting

Tims and Akkermans (2020) introduced the concept of career crafting to capture career-oriented proactive behaviors. They defined career crafting as the proactive actions individuals take to self-manage their careers to achieve an optimal alignment between their personal characteristics and career choices (pp. 175–176). Job crafting primarily seeks to improve the alignment of person-job fit, whereas in contrast, career crafting centers on achieving an optimal alignment between an individual and their overall career trajectory, emphasizing person-career fit (Tims and Akkermans, 2020). Crafting takes on increased significance during periods of uncertainty (De Jong *et al.*, 2020), enabling employees to develop a sense of meaning and purpose, leading to increased performance (Dubbelt *et al.*, 2019). Career crafting also does justice to the increased prevalence of the transitions individuals make throughout their careers. It captures an ongoing and dynamic interdependent relationship between employees and employers over time, wherein employees cross different social spaces (Van der Heijden and De Vos, 2015, p. 7).

From a SET perspective, organizations that provide a workplace environment that enables employees to craft their careers facilitate acquiring and retaining career resources, thereby empowering individuals to achieve their career objectives (Janssen *et al.*, 2021). The individual gains as they are given the support to deploy their resources, leading to objective and subjective career success, whilst the organization gains from increased retention rates because employees feel that their employer cares about their career progression (Donald, 2023c). Therefore, we propose the following:

Proposition 6 (P6). Career crafting moderates the positive relationship between self-perceived employability and objective career success (P6a) and subjective career success (P6b), such that this relationship is stronger when individuals have the opportunity to craft their careers.

Sustainable careers

According to Van der Heijden and De Vos (2015), a sustainable career is characterized by a series of career experiences manifesting in diverse patterns of continuity over time, transcending various social domains. A sustainable career is driven by individual agency and provides significant meaning to the individual (p. 7). Sustainable careers are analyzed according to the three dimensions of person, context, and time (De Vos *et al.*, 2020), whereby happiness, health, and productivity are proposed as their key indicators (Van der Heijden, 2005). In this paper, a person refers to an employee, context captures an individual's current employer, and time represents the individual's lifespan.

It seems reasonable that objective and subjective career success measures, including salary, occupational prestige, job performance, career satisfaction, emotional wellbeing, and flourishing (Spurk *et al.*, 2019), can lead to sustainable careers. For example, when an employee possesses the financial means and opportunities to engage in leisure activities, this can improve physical health and psychological resources (Kelly *et al.*, 2020). Participation in serious leisure activities, including volunteering, hobbies and competitive pursuits, has also been shown in India to help individuals manage high-stress levels and improve their workplace wellbeing (Nimmi and Donald, 2023). Nevertheless, building again on the SET framework (Blau, 1964), work-life balance responsibility must be shared between the employee and the

organization (Fan and Potočnik, 2021). Improving an individual's objective and subjective career success can subsequently enhance indicators of career sustainability such as happiness, health, and productivity (Van der Heijden, 2005). Consequently, we propose:

Proposition 7 (P7). Objective career success (P7a) and subjective career success (P7b) are positively related to a sustainable career.

Sustainable Organization(s)

Career success and sustainable careers of employees are desirable states for organizations since the benefits over time include increased retention rates, competitive edge, and financial profitability (Donald *et al.*, 2020). Organizations that offer a range of CD and HRM opportunities, and involve employees in designing and reviewing valuable employability enhancement practices and interventions, witness increased workplace satisfaction and career success in their employees, leading to increased productivity (Ybema *et al.*, 2020). Investment in acquiring and developing early career talent can also contribute to broader talent management strategies (Donald *et al.*, 2023; McCracken *et al.*, 2016), highlighting the shared tenets of VB, CD, and HRM literature streams. Developing organizational capital as an internal knowledge source promotes innovation and increases the chances of successfully adapting to challenges from future global-level events (Krammer, 2021). Career success benefits the person (employee) and the context in which they operate (organization), and when maintained over time, can offer sustainable outcomes to both parties. Therefore, we propose the following:

Proposition 8 (P8). A sustainable career is positively related to the sustainability of the organization(s) that employ(s) an individual at a specific point in time during their career.

Conceptual model

Figure 1 presents an integrative conceptual model of the eight propositions for framing sustainable careers.

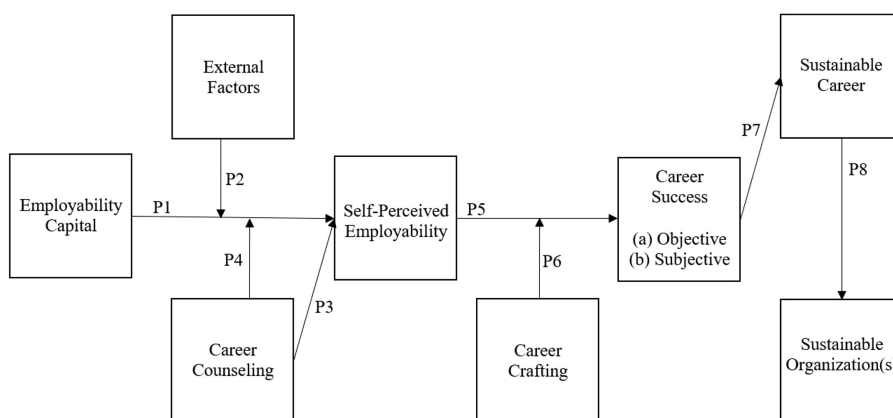


Figure 1. Framing sustainable careers: a conceptual model for sustainable careers and sustainable organizations integrating the vocational behavior (VB), career development (CD), and human resource management (HRM) literature

Note(s): For P8, a sustainable career can play out across one or more organizations at a given point in time or across one's career span

Source(s): Authors work

Implications and future research agenda

Theoretical, practical, and policy implications

To gain a comprehensive understanding of employability and career sustainability, we approached the subject through a SET (Blau, 1964) lens. This allowed us to explore the interdependence between employees and their employers and the nature of the exchanges between them (cf. Fugate *et al.*, 2021), wherein both parties strive for positive outcomes to benefit from their exchanges (Baruch and Rousseau, 2019). Our paper offers an integrated conceptual model comprising eight propositions. These propositions are derived from the VB, CD, and HRM literature streams to address concerns of limited overlaps despite common themes and objectives (Baruch and Sullivan, 2022; Healy *et al.*, 2022). Consequently, while a single proposition may appear evident to researchers specializing in one or even two of the three research streams, they seem less established or explored in the other stream(s).

Another contribution of the paper comes from examining how CD, as part of an HRM strategy, can influence VB and provide additional HRM benefits. Tzabbar *et al.* (2017) have observed that proactive talent management strategies can enhance productivity, benefiting organizations and national economies. Historically, organizations faced a dilemma regarding investing in developing employability capital in their employees, as it was often more cost-effective to hire individuals who already possessed such capital from competitor organizations (Rodrigues *et al.*, 2020). However, the global war for talent emphasized the need for CD and HRM strategies and policies to maximize sustainable outcomes for organizations and their employees (Cooke *et al.*, 2021; McGregor, 2022).

The global war for talent has spotlighted the essential nature of talent acquisition, development, and retention for influencing employee organizational performance and career sustainability (Ybema *et al.*, 2020). Additionally, the development of organizational capital as an internal source of knowledge promotes innovation and increases the organization's chances of successfully adapting to challenges posed by future chance events (Krammer, 2021). Organizations and their HRM professionals must proactively plan for talent acquisition and retention to ensure organizational success and employee sustainability. Failure to do so may result in employees being lured away by competitors, leaving organizations unable to rehire skilled talent when the economic outlook improves. Ultimately, this risks hindering the performance and sustainability of organizations and, consequently, their employees (Schrage *et al.*, 2022).

One approach available to employers is strategically investing in university students' CD as part of their HRM strategy. Positioning the duration of university education as a foundation for career sustainability contributes to talent management strategies that enhance organizational sustainability (Buckholtz and Donald, 2022; Donald *et al.*, 2024). Moreover, providing existing employees with career agency and progression opportunities is crucial (Fugate *et al.*, 2021). Recognizing the shared responsibility of employees and organizations and engaging in fruitful interactions where both parties benefit is essential, ensuring organizational performance and individual career sustainability over time. The concept aligns with the core idea of strategic HRM, which emphasizes the need for employees and organizations to dedicate sufficient time to meaningful exchanges that align an organization's strategic goals with individual employees' work and personal life-related goals (Van der Heijden, 2005).

Consequently, the interconnections among VB, CD, and HRM literature streams have significant implications for promoting career sustainability at the individual level while enhancing organizational sustainability via increased productivity, profitability, and competitive advantage (Branicki *et al.*, 2019; Van der Heijden, 2005; Ybema *et al.*, 2020). The integrative conceptual model presented in this paper allows organizations to revisit their existing CD and HRM policies and practices, ensuring their continued relevance and sustainability (Cooke *et al.*, 2021). Additionally, the model emphasizes the significance of ongoing dialogue between employees and employers regarding their responsibilities and the

necessary measures/actions to implement. By involving employees in decision-making processes related to CD and HRM policies that impact VB, organizations can increase the likelihood of employee buy-in and yield beneficial outcomes over time (Ybema *et al.*, 2020).

Future research agenda

Integrating VB, CD, and HRM literature streams via multiple stakeholder and interactive conceptualization can advance sustainable career research by addressing the overemphasis on career agency at the expense of considering contextual factors (Van der Heijden *et al.*, 2020). Empirical studies can help identify innovative ways for organizations to attract and retain talent (McGregor, 2022), particularly as individuals seek purpose and meaning in their lives following the temporary restrictions to daily life imposed by national governments in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Consequently, we call for future empirical research to consider sustainable careers by adopting a whole-life approach (Hirschi *et al.*, 2020) and to assess the effectiveness of different CD interventions (Chin *et al.*, 2022) to understand which approaches are most beneficial for both actors and which favor either the employee or the organization at the other's expense. For instance, what is the impact on productivity at the individual and organizational levels from focusing on outputs and contributions rather than location or the number of hours worked? Could providing employees with the opportunity to participate in serious leisure activities help them cope with higher stress levels, enhancing an employee's workplace wellbeing and performance? (Nimmi and Donald, 2023). Additionally, what opportunities exist for organizations to enhance employee happiness (Spurk *et al.*, 2019)?

A further opportunity for future research concerning sustainable careers involves moving beyond the employer-employee relationship in recognition of the linked and dependent nature of actors that make up a sustainable career ecosystem (Baruch, 2015; Donald, 2023b). We agree with Van der Heijden *et al.* (2020) that empirical research focusing on temporary workers, gig workers, and entrepreneurs can enhance the utility of the sustainable careers construct. Another aspect would be to explore project managers since, as Donald (2023a) observes, these workers have high levels of mobility and often experience multiple shifts between employee or contractor status across their career span.

Moreover, we call for longitudinal research to encompass the temporal aspect of career sustainability and consider how age and career stage may influence the individual and the relationship with their employer over time. It is possible that the volatility and uncertainty in global labor markets, combined with rises by national governments to the qualifying age for state pension, will increasingly require people and organizations to navigate chance events, career shocks, and variations in the availability of jobs and talent to ensure longevity and sustainability. Empirical research is thus required to consider the interplay between planned behavior, chance events, and career shocks across the career span (Akkermans *et al.*, 2021; Van der Heijden *et al.*, 2020).

Finally, a blend of quantitative, qualitative, and mixed methods studies can provide rich insights and understanding of a sustainable career's complex and multidimensional components. Such studies should focus on different geographic contexts, employment sectors, and domains (e.g. public versus private sector). We also call for studies to consider the future needs of individuals, employers, and broader society, to understand the implications, and to offer pragmatic, pre-emptive, and win-win strategies for all actors.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the conceptual model developed in this paper draws together the fragmented literature from the research streams of VB, CD, and HRM. Consequently, the conceptual

model and future research agenda can catalyze dialogue, challenge previously-held assumptions, and facilitate a more holistic approach to career and organizational sustainability.

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