

## FOSTERING EMPLOYABILITY AT WORK THROUGH JOB CRAFTING

**Riccardo Sartori, Francesco Tommasi, Andrea Ceschi, Giorgia Giusto, Sofia Morandini,  
Beniamino Caputo, & Marija Gostimir**

*Department of Human Science, University of Verona (Italy)*

### Abstract

In the current times of labor market transformations characterized by increasing globalization and digitalization processes, institutions and organizations are aiming at fostering employees' levels of employability via training interventions at work. Higher levels of employability sustain employees' competitiveness and job security as well as organizational productivity. Some scholarly authors define employability as a form of proactive adaptability specific to work that allows employees to identify and implement their career plans. It is also defined as the ability to transition effortlessly among the different occupations, allowing the individual to obtain employment. Given this, interventions aimed at fostering proactivity are deemed to be a possible way to foster employability. In recent years, researchers and practitioners have extensively examined employability, identifying different and separate antecedents, i.e., volition, support for career, skill development, job-related skills, willingness to change jobs, self-efficacy, and applicability of training on the job. In this study, we aim to give a contribution to such literature on training interventions to promote employability by proposing critical scrutiny around training interventions by which we will introduce job crafting intervention as a candidate to foster employability by supporting employees' proactive behaviors. Indeed, job crafting intervention is a specific training aimed at promoting proactive behavior. In particular, it focuses on four main employees' behavioral strategies, namely, (a) reducing job demands, (b) seeking challenges at work, (c) optimizing and (d) enhancing job resources. By promoting such behavioral strategies, employees can foster the applicability of learning by doing at work which directly affect the overall sense of employees' employability. For instance, seeking challenges strategies can indirectly lead to learn novel practices at work affecting their sense of competence and organizational belonging. Likewise, reducing job demands and enhancing job resources can be seen as behavioral strategies which can directly foster practical knowledge (i.e., know-how) and its applicability which in turn may lead to higher levels of perceived employability among employees. Hence, in this study, we will firstly outline the benefit of training interventions at the workplace within which job crafting can be seen as a possible training pathway to foster employability. Secondly, we will present the specific training strategies setting a research agenda for further developments. Ultimately, we aim at lecturing about the pragmatic and moral concern of the notion of employability by proposing a theoretical discussion for practical implications.

**Keywords:** Employability, training interventions, applicability, job crafting, research agenda.

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### 1. Introduction

The construct of employability is difficult to define owing to the different meanings that *to be employable* can have. One of the most widely accepted definition comes from Van der Heijde and Van der Heijden, who consider employability as a multidimensional construct characterized by the continuous fulfilling, acquiring, or creating of work through the optimal use of competences (van der Heijde & van der Heijden, 2006). Their definition is consistent both with the conceptualization of Forrier and Sels, which talk about employability like an individual chance for employment on the internal or external labor market (Forrier & Sels, 2003) and with the one of Fugate, Kinicki and Ashforth, who defined it as «a form of work specific active adaptability that enables workers to identify and realize career opportunities» (Fugate et al., 2004). Employability is studied from different angles and distinct levels (individual, organizational, and industrial) across a wide range of academic disciplines, such as business and management studies, human resource management, human resource development, psychology, educational science, and career theory (van der Heijde & van der Heijden, 2006), but all

conceptualizations, like those previously mentioned, share that employability implies a permanent process of acquisition and fulfillment of employment, within or outside the current organization.

Employability has been present in the literature for many years, but the current interest has been driven by changes in public employment policy. Therefore, given that several studies have shown that improving employability is fundamental for organizations and institutions that want to keep up with modern society's changes, it becomes essential thinking about interventions that promote the purpose of enhancing employability, intended as a specific form of proactive adaptability specifically for work that allows workers to identify and realize career opportunities. An objective that has led several authors to consider different types of interventions to increase opportunities for professional development and self-efficacy. Moreover, Whelan and colleagues, in a trial that wanted to examine whether interventions which aim to build employability by targeting individual wellbeing are more effective than conventional approaches, demonstrated how proposing intervention for improving career potential could have a significant impact on the employability of long-term unemployed workers (Whelan et al., 2018).

### **1.1. Aim of the study**

Employability can be promoted in many ways, but one of the most effective is certainly through interventions, especially if targeted at individual's needs, such as training and counseling. In fact, this kind of intervention affects people's wellbeing, showing improvements in mental health, self-esteem, and job-search self-efficacy, as well as a reduction in the occurrence of negative automatic thoughts and employment (Whelan et al., 2018). Furthermore, numerous authors reported learning at work is an important antecedent of employability whose impact can be emphasized (e.g., van der Heijden et al., 2016). Given the importance and effectiveness of interventions, we intend to conduct a critical review of training interventions, focusing especially on job crafting intervention, that in the last two decades several scholars reported as crucial in the field of career development. Job crafting is an informal process that focuses on the positive changes that employees can make in order to shape their work practice to align with their idiosyncratic interests and values, and ultimately, enhance the enjoyment, meaning, and satisfaction they attain from their work (Slemp & Vella-Brodrick, 2014), and previous studies have shown a positive relationship between job crafting and employability (Tims et al., 2012; Brenninkmeijer and Hekkert-Koning, 2015).

In accordance with scholars that define job crafting as a possible pathway to foster employability, in the present contribution we aim to outline the benefit of job crafting training interventions at the workplace. Then, we will propose some strategies in order to provide a research agenda that can be a guide for future development. Lastly, we will discuss employability definitions and pragmatic and moral concerns of the notion of employability by proposing a theoretical discussion to future practical implications.

## **2. The applicability intervention**

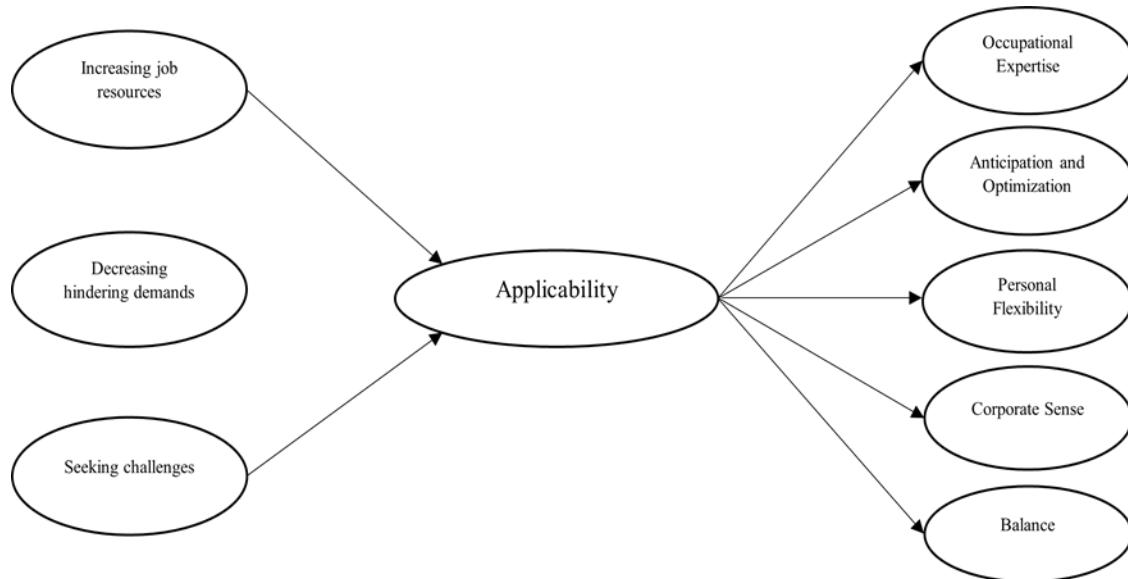
Applicability is a particular type of intervention that deals with the promotion of practical knowledge at work and job crafting can be viewed as an antecedent of applicability. Applicability is constituted by training and development activities which refer to the systematic approach to learning aimed at improving individual, team, and organizational effectiveness (Goldstein & Ford, 2002; Paradise, 2007; Rivera & Paradise, 2007), and may produce important benefits for individual employees (Arthur et al., 2003; Hill & Lent, 2006; Satterfield & Hughes, 2007), teams, organizations, and society as a whole (Aguinis & Kraiger, 2009; Noe et al., 2010). However, in order for training and development to be effective, it is highly important to carefully consider the applicability of newly learned knowledge, attitudes, and skills to safeguard the enhancement of both employee and, subsequently, organizational-level outcomes (Antonacopoulou, 2016; Kozlowski et al., 2000). Participation in training and development programs is rarely enough to guarantee its effectiveness of it (Baldwin & Ford, 1988). Estimates of newly learned competences' loss, due to poor transfer of training, range from 66% (Saks & Belcourt, 1997) to 90% (Curry et al., 1994; Sookhai & Budworth, 2010). It is the positive transfer of training and development - that is, the extent to which the learning that results from it transfers to the job - that leads to meaningful changes in work performance and, consequently, employability enhancement (Blume et al., 2010; Holton III et al., 2001). Adequate transfer of newly learned knowledge, attitudes, and skills stimulate an employee to become an autonomous learner who can deal with new tasks and unfamiliar problem situations, and of developing adaptive expertise (see also Ford & Schmidt, 2000). Competences that are newly acquired in training need to be fully and appropriately transferred to and applied in job-related activities (Aguinis & Kraiger, 2009; Holton III, Chen, & Naquin, 2003; Kontoghiorghe, 2004) in order to actually further develop workers' employability (Eraut, 2004; Hicks, Bagg, Doyle, & Young, 2007; Pulakoset al., 2000; Russ-Eft, 2002).

In other words, the applicability of newly acquired competences in the practice of one's current job (Broad, 1997; Mathieu, Tannenbaum, & Salas, 1992; Tracey, Tannenbaum, & Kavanagh, 1995; Wexley & Latham, 1991) is of crucial importance to increase their actual use and to enhance workers' career potential (De Vos et al., 2011; Van der Heijden & Van der Heijden, 2006). For these reasons, applicability could be the main intervention to use in order to increase the levels of perceived employability.

### 3. Interweaving applicability intervention and job crafting intervention

Nowadays, there is a lack of knowledge concerning the relationship between job crafting and applicability of training. The present research aims to examine if teaching employees to craft their job may impact on the levels of applicability of training which, in turn, is positively related to the self-reported dimensions of employability (see Figure 1) (Plomp et al., 2019). We argue that if job crafting is associated with a type of experiential learning, the experience directly teaches something about work, and this can increase the level of employability, namely job crafting can directly affect on learning, and indirectly on employability.

*Figure 1. Hypothesized model of Job Crafting fostering Applicability and Employability.*



Job crafting (Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001) is a construct that represents the proactive role of the worker in modifying and redesigning activities, tasks, and work to adapt them to his/her personal characteristics and aptitudes. Theorization of this theme is inspired by studies on "idiosyncratic jobs", namely jobs that are not linked to explicit contractual terms but rather focus on extra-economic characteristics, such as organizational atmosphere or trust (Bonazzi, 2007). These studies radically changed the psychological view of work, promoting a shift from defining tasks regardless of who was doing them to considering more individual characteristics and trying to fulfill them. Job Crafting strategies consist of four proactive behaviors: (a) reducing job demands, (b) seeking challenges at work, (c) optimizing and (d) enhancing job resources. Theoretical models that have contributed most to the development of job crafting are the JD-R Model and the Job Identity Model. The first one, formulated by Bakker e Demerouti (2007), states that this re-modeling activity would be aimed at balancing job demands and job resources of employees: while demands involve physical or mental effort, resources facilitate the individual in achieving their goals. In this perspective, Job Crafting interventions would therefore aim to increase available resources and reduce the demands of the work environment (de Gennaro, Buonocore & Ferrara, 2017). The second theoretical model was developed by the own authors of job crafting conceptualization and asserts that individuals can proactively interfere to modify the content of their work to make it consistent with their individual characteristics (Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001). Subsequently, Petrou et al. (2012) collapsed the two dimensions by Tims et al. (2012) related to job resources (increasing structural and social job resources) and differentiated between three characteristics of job crafting: seeking resources, seeking challenges, and reducing demands (Svicher & Di Fabio, 2021).

We suggest that increasing job resources can be seen as a cognitive mechanism underlying applicability. Indeed, increasing job resources refers to the extent to which employees learn how to enhance their resources at work whether they refer to both relations and work conditions. Viewed as a form of experiential learning we suggest that the motivational and cognitive mechanism underlying applicability may cover the mechanism promoted via a job crafting intervention. This in turn would lead to higher levels of employability at work thanks to the enhancement of the experiential capacity development and the linked cognitive awareness.

**Proposition 1:** Increasing job resources can affect the extent to which employees learn through work. Higher levels of increasing job resources can indirectly support the enhancement of employability.

Moreover, we propose that seeking challenges can support applicability and indirectly affect employability dimensions. In particular, as demonstrated in several studies (e.g., Harju, L. K., 2016), seeking challenges at work enhances employee work engagement, prevents job boredom, and generates other job crafting behaviors. If job crafting is associated with experiential learning, outcomes that can be achieved in terms of employability are greater. Based on these assumptions, we hypothesize that a job crafting intervention focused on seeking challenges would promote an applicability intervention which, in turn, would have a positive impact on perceived employability. Conversely, decreasing hindering demands represent a challenging aspect related to the work conditions which are not related to cognitive dimensions and even more, experiential learning. Therefore, we suggest that

**Proposition 2:** Seeking challenges can affect the extent to which employees learn through work. Higher levels of seeking challenges can indirectly support the enhancement of employability.

Such propositions can be verified via multiple ways. From a theoretical point of view, our study is limited to assuming such associations given the prominence of a few literary sources. Therefore, we suggest that such assumptions may be further explored via conceptual analysis and theoretical reflections by scholarly authors. From an empirical point of view, we suggest that our assumptions may be tested both with classical experimental research design. For instance, training interventions may be devised, and participants of the study assigned to three different groups. One group may receive a classical applicability intervention. A second group may receive a job crafting intervention while a third group may participate in both job crafting and applicability interventions. Then, a fourth control group may be included and comparisons can be made between participants to see the extent to which employability at work is promoted. Moreover, a cross-sectional study comprising measures of job crafting dimensions, applicability and employability could provide initial evidence of the relationships among dimensions. Likewise, longitudinal studies could be devised in order to verify the causal role of job crafting dimensions in both applicability and employability. These methods could help to figure out the overall effect of job crafting behavior on how and to what extent applicability and employability are related.

#### 4. Conclusion

Building on previous studies reporting the key contribution of informal learning to employability enhancement, we hypothesized that training employees to craft their job would relate to higher applicability of the training on the job and developmental activities and, consequently, to employability enhancement. However, our study is limited to a short literature review. Although this compromises our contribution, its originality offers some indications about further exploration by proposing two propositions that could be tested in multiple ways. Indeed, we argue that our propositions can be a possible explanation of the motivational and cognitive mechanism underlying applicability, and the knowledge on it can be useful to propose possible training intervention at work for the promotion of employability.

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