**Sustainable Careers and Organisations:   
Development of a Conceptual Framework and Future Research Agenda**

**Abstract**

This paper aims to construct an integrative conceptual framework to foster sustainability for employees and organisations by adopting a Social Exchange Theory (SET) lens. A set of nine propositions are developed that integrate the often-fragmented literature streams of Vocational Behaviour (VB), Human Resource Management (HRM), and Human Resource Development (HRD). Our conceptual model draws together dimensions of Human Capital, Career Ownership, Career Counselling, Self-Perceived Employability, Career Crafting, Career Success, Sustainable Careers and Sustainable Organisations. The theoretical contribution comes from our conceptual model combining the VB, HRM and HRD literature streams and integrating these by adopting a SET lens. The latter implies that we recognise that employees and organisations engage in a series of interdependent interactions wherein both parties can benefit from these exchanges. The practical contribution comes from informing HRM and HRD policies and practices to maximise sustainable outcomes for both parties.

**Keywords**

Human Capital, Career Ownership, Career Counselling, Self-Perceived Employability, Career Crafting, Career Success, Sustainable Careers, Sustainable Organisations, Social Exchange Theory.

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**Introduction**

The Vocational Behaviour (VB) literature continues to be dominated by research promoting self-efficacy, career agency, and proactive behaviours as strategies to enable individuals to enhance their employability, develop resilience, and navigate uncertainty across their careers (Blustein et al., 2020; Hall, Yip and Doiron, 2018; Smale et al., 2019). However, recent global-level chance events such as the Covid-19 pandemic and the War on Ukraine have highlighted how uncertainty via unforeseen circumstances can cause career shocks and dramatically impact contemporary labour markets (Akkermans et al., 2021; Donald and Mouratidou, 2022; Wood et al., 2018). The Covid-19 pandemic has resulted in ‘The Great Resignation’ as individuals seek purpose and meaning in their lives following restrictions and disruption (Afshari, 2021). Moreover, the War in Ukraine has influenced employability in industries where supply chains have been re-configured due to the reduction or cessation of trading with Russia and the pivoting away from oil and gas dependency by European countries (OECD, 2022). Resultantly, organisations need to identify innovative ways to compete in the ‘War for Talent’ (Donald, Ashleigh and Baruch, 2022; McGregor, 2022) and to protect and further enhance workers’ employability, highlighting a need to look towards the future of Human Resource Management (HRM; Cooke, Dickmann and Parry, 2021).

An emerging area of interest in the scholarly domains of employability and sustainable careers research is the interplay and development over time between individual agency and contextual factors (De Vos, Van der Heijden and Akkermans, 2020; Fugate et al., 2021; Harari, McCombs and Wiernik, 2021). Such a view posits that employability is malleable and that organisations, via strategic HRM and Human Resource Development (HRD) interventions, can enhance the personal resources of their employees (Huang, Xing and Gamble, 2019; Khan et al., 2019; Nimmi, Joseph and Donald, 2022). Additionally, workers’ employability and their career sustainability are far more complex than just having a job and comprise a dynamic interplay between employees (in terms of fulfilling their job) and employers (in terms of competitive advantage) (Fugate et al., 2021). 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 understanding of the interdependency between employees and their employers and the nature of the exchanges between them (cf. Fugate et al., 2021).

Consequently, this paper aims to construct an integrative conceptual framework to foster sustainability for employees and organisations. Nine propositions are systematically developed that respond to recent calls to integrate the often-fragmented literature streams of VB, HRM, and HRD (Baruch and Sullivan, 2022; Healy, Hammer and McIlveen, 2022). The development of these propositions captures how HRM and HRD interventions can influence organisational performance via increased productivity and competitive advantage and, at the individual level, promote sustainable careers and employee well-being (Branicki, Steyer and Sullivan-Taylor, 2019; Johnson, 2020; Van der Heijden, 2005; Ybema, Van Vuuren and Van Dam, 2020). Employers' strategic investment in HRM and HRD, and opportunities for career agency and career progression at the employee level, can subsequently benefit both parties (Fugate et al., 2021; Rodrigues, Butler and Guest, 2020).

The theoretical contribution comes from our conceptual model combining the VB, HRM and HRD literature streams and integrating these by adopting a SET lens. 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 employer (*context*) over time (*time*) that ultimately determines the outcomes of the exchange relationship. Our approach incorporates the three dimensions of a sustainable career, including person, context, and time (De Vos, Van der Heijden and Akkermans, 2020). By recognising that employees and their organisations engage in a series of interdependent interactions wherein both parties benefit from these exchanges, our practical contribution comes from informing HRM and HRD policies and practices to maximise sustainable outcomes for both parties. Finally, providing a future research agenda enhances our essay by offering pragmatic opportunities for empirical work to test and revise our conceptual offering (Ainsworth and Knox, 2022).

Our focus now shifts to outlining our integrative conceptual framework and systematically developing a set of nine propositions. The paper concludes by evidencing the implications offered by our new framework and the associated opportunities for future research.

**Integrative Conceptual Framework Development**

Figure I (next page) presents an integrative conceptual framework. We now systematically evidence the development of each of the nine propositions.

***Human Capital and Self-Perceived Employability***

Human Capital theory (Becker, 1964) points out that individuals and society derive economic benefits from investments in people. Although types of human capital investments generally include health and nutrition (Schultz, 1981), education consistently emerges as the prime human capital investment for scholarly research (Sweetland, 1966). Individuals who invest and partake in training and development can increase their productivity leading to enhanced employment outcomes. Human capital has been characterised as task-specific (Gibbons and Waldman, 2004) or firm-specific (Lazear, 2009). Task-specific human capital is often viewed as more beneficial to the individual, whilst firm-specific human capital is often regarded as more advantageous to the organisation, leading to a so-called employability paradox (De Cuyper and De Witte, 2011). However, organisations that signal the value of their employees by investing in opportunities to develop both types of human capital are likely to retain their talent since employees are more likely to stay with an organisation that invests in HRD opportunities (Rodrigues, Butler and Guest, 2020; cf. the Strategic Employability Architecture framework by Fugate et al., 2021).

In this paper, we apply the view of Donald, Baruch and Ashleigh (2019), who claimed that human capital is an accumulation of six types of capital: social capital, cultural capital, psychological capital, scholastic capital, market-value capital, and skills capital. Their model extends the previous work of Useem and Karabel (1986) and Baruch, Bell and Gray (2005), who contextualised human capital in an educational setting and perceived the phenomenon as an aggregate construct of different forms of capital. Other scholars have positioned human capital as a distinct capital in its own right, preferring graduate capital as the collective term for the different forms of capital (e.g., Tomlinson, 2017). In that conceptualisation, human capital refers to scholastic capital, market-value capital, and skills capital in Donald and colleagues’ model. However, we feel that human capital is a more appropriate terminology for the aggregate in the context of our paper since non-graduates can also hold forms of human capital.

Human capital accumulation increased self-perceived employability in UK-based university students (Donald, Baruch and Ashleigh, 2019), whilst social capital and psychological capital were associated with high employability in college graduates (Direnzo, Greenhaus and Weer, 2015). Within the labour market, psychological capital (Nimmi, Joseph and Donald, 2022) and career competencies (Blokker et al., 2019) are associated with increased self-perceived employability in young professionals. Building on the definition of employability as “the ability to keep the job one has or to get the job one desires” (Rothwell and Arnold, p. 25), self-perceived employability is defined as “the individual’s perceptions of his or her possibilities of obtaining or maintaining employment” (Vanhercke et al., p. 594). We believe that accumulating personal resources via human capital equips an individual to meet higher individual-driven and employer-driven demands, which translates into increased self-perceived employability. Therefore, we propose the following:

Proposition 1 (P1): *Human capital is positively related to self-perceived employability.*

**Diagram, schematic

Description automatically generated**

**Note**: Dotted lines for P4, P5, and P7 indicate moderation.

**Figure I**: A conceptual framework for sustainable careers and sustainable organisations integrating Vocational Behaviour (VB),   
Human Resource Management (HRM), and Human Resource Development (HRD) literature.

***Adopting a Social Exchange Theory Lens on the Phenomenon of Employability***

A protean career is defined as a career in which the person is “1) values-driven in the sense that their internal values provide guidance and measure of success for their career; and 2) self-directed in personal career management – having the ability to be adaptive in terms of performance and learning demands” (Briscoe and Hall, 2006, p. 8). A protean career requires an individual to take ownership of their career, whereby self-awareness and adaptability can help manage change across one’s career span (Hall, 1976). Following the line of reasoning introduced by Fugate and associates (2021), we argue that SET can be used as a foundation for capturing the series of interdependent interactions (dynamic exchanges) between employees and employers that three elements can characterise: “(a) resources exchanged (inducements and contributions), (b) backwards- and forward-looking exchanges, and (c) the process of exchange” (p. 283). In particular, in their dynamic interaction, employees and their employers exchange resources, such that employer inducements are provided in exchange for employee contributions, and employee contributions, in turn, are responded to using additional employer inducements (Coyle-Shapiro and Shore, 2007).

The employer inducements and employee contributions are conceived as backwards- or forward-looking exchanges (Cook et al., 2013). Based on reinforcement principles, backwards-looking exchanges imply that one’s reactions are based on something received in the past and on the anticipation of future rewards (Fugate et al., 2021). Contrastingly, forward-looking exchanges imply that employers expect productive employees when investing in their employability development (Fugate et al., 2021). Considering the dynamic pattern of interdependent interactions between employees and their employers, the mechanisms explaining backwards- versus forward-looking employability exchanges may differ (Cronin and Vancouver, 2018). In other words, while both parties (i.e., the employee and their employer) are interdependent, this interdependence does not necessarily mean a balance in their relationship. One party may be more dependent on the relationship than the other, and consequently invest disproportionately (Tsui et al., 1997), herewith (seriously) endangering the sustainability of one of the parties over time.

The risk of such an occurrence is further increased by the rising prevalence of career shocks in current labour markets (Akkermans et al., 2021; Wood et al., 2018). Subsequently, employees increasingly demand that their employers enable them to manage their careers proactively. Organisations that provide the resources to do so are rewarded with reduced personnel turnover (Rodrigues, Butler and Guest, 2020) (i.e., interdependent interactions or dynamic exchanges; Fugate et al., 2021). More specifically, career ownership takes on increased importance for individuals navigating volatile and dynamic labour markets (Baruch, 2014). A values-driven and self-directed approach to career ownership can facilitate an individual to develop human capital and acquire appropriate resources as identified by their lived experiences (Hall, 2004). Moreover, career ownership has been theorised to help foster a lifelong learning mindset, herewith increasing the likelihood of valorising different forms of human capital for deployment and employability enhancement now and across one’s career span (Donald, Baruch and Ashleigh, 2020).

Additional scholarly work has indicated that protean career attitude, or taking ownership of one’s career, is positively related to self-perceived employability (Direnzo, Greenhaus and Weer, 2015; Donald, Baruch and Ashleigh, 2019; Tee et al., 2022). In a similar vein, De Vos and colleagues (2011), in their work on competency development and career success, reported that individuals’ active engagement in participation in development activities is related to workers’ perceptions of employability. Indeed, human capital and career ownership have both been shown to enhance self-perceived employability (Direnzo, Greenhaus and Weer, 2015; Donald, Baruch and Ashleigh, 2019) and are positioned as antecedents to a sustainable career (Donald, Baruch and Ashleigh, 2020). For example, the reflective dimension of career ownership can lead to increased adaptability (Son, 2018) by motivating an individual to adopt a growth mindset and a commitment to lifewide and lifelong learning (Cole and Donald, 2022).

Furthermore, nurturing one’s adaptability by focusing on human capital to upskill and reskill can help to overcome anxieties associated with the future of work. For example, protean career orientation is positively related to career optimism (Chui, Li and Ngo, 2022). Organisations thus also have a role to play in providing an environment whereby employees can proactively manage their careers and operationalise personal resources for the benefit of both parties (Hobfoll, 2012; Hobfoll et al., 2018). Garavan et al. (2001) co-edited a special issue titled “Human resource development: sectoral and invention-level evidence of human capital accumulation”. They recognised the potential for human capital to benefit both the individual and the organisation and called for organisations to focus on human capital accumulation as part of their HRM and HRD strategy. The need for career counselling as part of HRM and HRD interventions aimed at employability enhancement takes on increased significance to support human capital development over time to adapt to uncertain environments (Baldi and Trigeorgis, 2020).

We believe that organisations’ provision of career counselling can help employees strengthen the added value of human capital by providing inducements aligned to their employees' unique knowledge and skills attributes (cf. the Strategic Employability Architecture framework by Fugate et al., 2021). The latter is needed to optimise the quality of the dynamic exchange relationship that lays the foundation for meeting employee and organisational demands over time. Such HRM and HRD interventions could also take place in partnership with external providers of career counselling (e.g., university careers services) to prepare early career talent for the labour market. The potential exists for win-win outcomes for both parties since resources available to provide career counselling are often limited (Buckholtz and Donald, 2022; Donald, Ashleigh and Baruch, 2022). Correspondingly, career counselling has the potential to be framed as a Positive Psychology Intervention.

Yet, traditional Positive Psychology Interventions often only result in marginal positive impacts on enhancing desirable work outcomes (Donaldson, Lee and Donaldson, 2019). To address such concerns, Van Woerkom (2021) introduced a new typology of Positive Psychology Interventions that drew together the individual and organisational levels and prioritised structural over one-off interventions. When seen from the SET lens (Blau, 1964) that underlies our integrative conceptual model, career counselling can offer such an approach since it can be framed to acknowledge both employee and organisational demands for sustainability (i.e., individual employability and organisational competitive advantage) (Fugate et al., 2021), that can be maintained and developed over time (Van Woerkom, Bakker and Leiter, 2021). The position is further supported by Donald and Manville (2023), whereby early intervention and continued support across the career span can foster self-efficacy, enabling an individual to navigate career shocks and chance events when they inevitably occur, leading to sustainable outcomes for employees and their employers.

A further consideration is the ‘dark side’ of contemporary careers and the constant tension when balancing opportunities/threats, truth/untruth, and positive/negative aspects related to sustainable outcomes for both employees and their employers (Baruch and Vardi, 2016). Their work highlights systemic organisational issues that blame employees for struggling to cope with workplace demands. We believe that career counselling can strengthen the association between human capital and self-perceived employability by helping individuals identify which competencies (i.e., knowledge and skills) they need to safeguard and enhance their employability to meet (future) workplace demands. Specifically, De Vos and associates (2011) found that organisational support for developing competencies and an organisational culture that supports individual development (cf. Nauta et al., 2009) enhances workers’ self-perceived employability. Organisations that provide support for setting goals, by means of valuable interventions, as an example of career counselling activities, can also help individuals decrease stress and increase performance at work (Weintraub, Cassell and DePatie, 2021).

Additionally, Neault and Pickerell (2011) posited that career counselling could support an individual in balancing capacity and challenge as an essential aspect of one’s employability (cf. the balance dimension of the employability operationalisation by Van der Heijde and Van der Heijden, 2006). Gupta (2019) found that career counselling can help individuals to identify purpose, values, and strengths (cf. the anticipation and optimisation dimension of the employability operationalisation by Van der Heijde and Van der Heijden, 2006). Moreover, when organisations offer mindfulness and career counselling resources to employees, the employee's perception of their personal resources can be enhanced, enabling them to increase their self-efficacy, improve their work engagement, and enhance authentic functioning (Bakker, 2017; Choi et al., 2022; Donald and Manville, 2023). In doing so, organisations can facilitate the enhancement of human capital as a personal resource that can aggregate in clusters in a so-called resource caravan (Hobfoll, 2012). As such, following the notion of SET (Blau, 1964), career counselling can provide the resource passageway for further operationalisation and valorisation of these resources (Hobfoll et al., 2018; Nimmi, Joseph and Donald, 2022) and translate them into employability development as the basis for sustainable careers and organisations.

To conclude, we believe that when employees desire career ownership and when organisations provide opportunities for career counselling (herewith both carry responsibility for protecting and further enhancing the quality of the interdependent exchange relationship between both parties (Blau, 1964; Fugate et al., 2021), the relationship between human capital and self-perceived employability will strengthen. Based on the outline given above, we propose the following:

Proposition 2 (P2): *Career ownership is positively related to self-perceived employability.*

Proposition 3 (P3): *Career counselling is positively related to self-perceived employability.*

Proposition 4 (P4): *Career ownership moderates the positive relationship between human capital and self-perceived employability, such that this relationship is stronger when career ownership is higher.*

Proposition 5 (P5): *Career counselling moderates the positive relationship between human capital and self-perceived employability, such that this relationship is stronger when career counselling is higher.*

***Self-Perceived Employability and Career Success***

Self-perceived employability can increase the likelihood of career success (De Vos, De Hauw and Van der Heijden, 2011; Frederiksen and Kato, 2018; Haenggli et al., 2021). For example, resilience has been linked to increased well-being and beneficial HRM outcomes as employees are better equipped to adapt to threats and overcome adversities (Liu, Cooper and Tarba, 2019; Nimmi, Joseph and Donald, 2022). We believe that nowadays, the acquisition of employability will play an even more significant role in career success as the length of an individual’s career continues to increase along with the occurrences of chance events (e.g., pandemics, wars, climate change) and technological advancement (Amankwah-Amoah et al., 2021; Donald, Baruch and Ashleigh, 2022).

A career captures the unfolding sequence of one’s work experiences over time (Arthur, Hall and Lawrence, 1989), whereby career success combines objective and subjective dimensions (Spurk, Hirschi and Dries, 2019). In particular, objective career success focuses on aspects of success that can be measured and observed based on standardised measures and social comparisons (Arthur, Khapova and Wilderom, 2005). Subjective career success addresses personally desirable success based on one’s own evaluation of achieving meaningful career outcomes (Mirvis and Hall, 1994). Career success can incorporate salary, occupational prestige, job performance, career satisfaction, happiness, emotional well-being, and physical health (Lee and Eissenstat, 2018; Spurk, Hirschi and Dries, 2019). Based on the views of Rothwell and Arnold (2007) that self-perceived employability is positively associated with career success and the scholarly work by Niu et al. (2019) indicating that self-perceived employability is positively related to subjective career success, we propose:

Proposition 6 (P6): *Self-perceived employability is positively related to career success.*

***The Moderating Effect of Career Crafting on the Relationship Between Self-Perceived Employability and Career Success***

Akkermans and Tims (2017) observed a positive association between job crafting and career success, whereby job crafting allows individuals to operationalise personal resources and career competencies for the better. Job crafting and wider life crafting take on increased significance during periods of uncertainty, such as the Covid-19 pandemic (De Jong, Ziegler and Schippers, 2020), as they enable employees to develop a sense of meaning and purpose, leading to increased performance (Dubbelt, Demerouti and Rispens, 2019; Van Wingerden and Poell, 2017). While job crafting aims to enhance person-job fit, career crafting focuses on person-career fit and, hence, one's overarching career (Tims and Akkermans, 2020).

In current labour markets, careers have evolved from a one-time occupational choice and lifetime employment to ongoing processes of dynamic interdependent relationships between employees and employers over time, wherein employees cross different social spaces (Van der Heijden and De Vos, 2015, p. 7). Building on the notion of job crafting, scholars became interested in the phenomenon of career crafting to do justice to the increased prevalence of the transitions individuals make throughout their careers. Tims and Akkermans (2020) conceptualised career-oriented proactive career behaviours as career crafting and defined these as the “proactive behaviors that individuals perform to self-manage their career and that are aimed at attaining optimal person-career fit” (pp. 175-176).

Integrating the scholarly work on career crafting with the Conservation of Resources (COR) theory (Hobfoll, 1989, 2001), career crafting can be viewed as a proactive resource management behaviour aimed at using, maintaining, and acquiring career resources to achieve career goals (Janssen et al., 2021). Based on the outline given above, we argue that career crafting can facilitate individuals to strengthen the relationship between self-perceived employability and career success by utilising resources and personal perceptions of employability to achieve their desired goals. Therefore, we propose the following:

Proposition 7 (P7): *Career crafting moderates the positive relationship between self-perceived employability and career success, such that this relationship is stronger when the employee is more involved in career crafting.*

***Career Success and Sustainability for Employees and their Organisations***

Van der Heijden and De Vos (2015) defined a sustainable career as “sequences of career experiences reflected through a variety of patterns of continuity over time, thereby crossing several social spaces, characterized by individual agency, herewith providing meaning to the individual” (p. 7). Sustainable careers are analysed according to the three dimensions of person, context, and time (De Vos, Van der Heijden and Akkermans, 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, a context refers to the organisation where an individual is employed, and time represents the span of one’s career.

We believe that aspects of objective and subjective career success (e.g., salary, occupational prestige, job performance, career satisfaction, happiness, emotional well-being, physical health, and flourishing) can lead to sustainable careers. For example, having the financial means and the opportunity to participate in leisure activities can improve physical health and enhance psychological resources (Kelly et al., 2020). Participation in serious leisure activities, including hobbies and competitive pursuits, has also been shown to help individuals to manage high-stress levels and improve their workplace well-being (Nimmi and Donald, 2022). As an example of a subjective career success outcome, such participation gives the individual a greater opportunity to maintain a sustainable career across their working life.

Nevertheless, building again on the SET framework (Blau, 1964), work-life balance responsibility needs to be shared between the employee and the organisation (Fan and Potočnik, 2021). Next to taking career ownership by the individual career actor themselves, the provision of resources by organisations and the opportunities for employees to acquire and develop human capital relies on ethical leadership (Freire and Bettencourt, 2021). Career success and sustainability of employees is a desirable state for organisations since benefits over time include increased levels of retention, competitive advantage, and financial performance (Donald, Baruch and Ashleigh, 2020). Organisations that offer a range of HRM and HRD opportunities and involve employees in designing and reviewing valuable employability enhancement practices and interventions have higher levels of workplace satisfaction and perceived career success, leading to increased productivity (Ybema, Van Vuuren and Van Dam, 2020). Investment in acquiring and developing early-career talent can also contribute to broader talent management strategies (Donald, Baruch and Ashleigh, 2022; McCracken, Currie and Harrison, 2016). Developing organisational 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 (organisation), and when maintained over time, can offer sustainable outcomes. Therefore, we propose the following:

Proposition 8 (P8): *Career success is positively related to a sustainable career.*

Proposition 9 (P9): *Career success is positively related to a sustainable organisation.*

**Implications and Future Research Agenda**

Our focus now shifts to the implications offered by our new conceptual framework and the associated opportunities for future research.

***Theoretical, Practical, and Policy Implications***

The overall objective of this paper was to construct an integrative conceptual framework to foster sustainability for employees and organisations. In doing so, the theoretical contribution of our paper comes from combining the VB, HRM and HRD scholarly fields and integrating these by adopting a SET (Blau, 1964) lens. Inherent to our integrative conceptual framework is that it incorporates the person, context, and time dimensions (De Vos, Van der Heijden and Akkermans, 2020) and recognises the dynamic interaction between the employee and their employer wherein ultimately both parties strive for positive outcomes to benefit from their exchanges.

In particular, nine propositions have been developed that can form the basis for sound empirical work to integrate the often-fragmented literature streams of VB, HRM, and HRD (Baruch and Sullivan, 2022; Healy, Hammer and McIlveen, 2022). The development of these propositions captures how HRM and HRD interventions can influence organisational performance via increased productivity and competitive advantage and, at the individual level, promote sustainable careers and employee well-being (Branicki, Steyer and Sullivan-Taylor, 2019; Johnson, 2020; Van der Heijden, 2005; Ybema, Van Vuuren and Van Dam, 2020). Employers' strategic investment in HRM and HRD, and opportunities for career agency and career progression at the employee level, can subsequently benefit both parties (Fugate et al., 2021; Rodrigues, Butler and Guest, 2020). Thus, via the integrative conceptual framework that has been developed, we have visualized how, in our view, HRM and HRD interventions can help inform HRM and HRD policies and practices to maximise sustainable outcomes for organisations and individuals.

By recognising that employees and their organisations are both responsible for spending ample time to engage in a series of fruitful interactions wherein both parties benefit from these exchanges, both organisational performance and the career sustainability of individual employees can be safeguarded over time. The latter forms the core notion of strategic HRM and helps both parties determine what activities they should concentrate on to help align the organisation’s strategic goals with the individual employee’s work and personal life-related goals (Van der Heijden, 2005). Organisations must reframe their HRM future perspective following the COVID-19 pandemic, to give an example of a global chance event (Cooke, Dickmann and Parry, 2021). Taking proactive action is crucial since effective talent management strategies can enhance productivity, benefiting organisations and national economies (Tzabbar, Tzafrir and Baruch, 2017). The global war for talent emphasises the need for HRM and HRD strategies and policies to maximise the chances of sustainable outcomes for both organisations and their staff (McGregor, 2022).

Historically, there was a risk of investment in human capital development since it was often cheaper for an organisation to acquire individuals already possessing human capital from a competitor organisation (Rodrigues, Butler and Guest, 2020). However, the global war for talent means that the acquisition, development, and retention of talent take centre stage for organisations as they seek to influence the organisational performance and career sustainability of their members at the same time (Branicki, Steyer and Sullivan-Taylor, 2019; Johnson, 2020; Ybema, Van Vuuren and Van Dam, 2020). A promising way to do so is by establishing partnerships with universities to develop sustainable talent pipelines (Buckholtz and Donald, 2022). Organisations, and their HRM professionals, need to consider ways to proactively plan to retain talent or risk losing employees to competitors and subsequently being unable to re-hire skilled talent when the economic outlook improves. They should also be aware of the potential threats of contracting economies being driven by unsustainable practices. Ultimately, this will hinder both their organisational performance and their employees’ sustainability (Schrage et al., 2022).

The integrative conceptual framework developed in this paper also offers an opportunity for organisations to revisit existing HRM and HRD policies and practices to ensure that they remain relevant and sustainable (Cooke, Dickmann and Parry, 2021). Moreover, the framework highlights opportunities for ongoing dialogue about both parties’ responsibilities and measures/actions to be taken. We posit that engaging employees in decisions regarding HRM and HRD policies and practices increases the likelihood of buy-in and beneficial outcomes over time (Ybema, Van Vuuren and Van Dam, 2020). We now conclude the manuscript with suggestions for a future research agenda.

***Future Research Agenda***

The end-to-end and integrative nature of the framework, coupled with the nine propositions, can now be tested and refined based on empirical data to identify integrative HRD approaches that can enhance sustainable career and HRM outcomes (Chin, Jawahar and Li, 2022).

We believe our conceptual framework can offer a foundation for empirical research to overcome existing concerns that the employer and context dimensions are underrepresented in sustainable career studies (Van der Heijden et al., 2020). Our integration of the VB, HRM, and HRD literature streams via a multiple stakeholder and interactive conceptualisation has the potential to advance sustainable career research by addressing the overemphasis on career agency at the expense of considering contextual factors (Akkermans and Kubasch, 2017).

We call for future empirical research to consider sustainable careers within a whole-life approach (Hirschi et al., 2020) and to assess the effectiveness of different HRD interventions to understand which approaches are most beneficial for both actors and which favour either the employee or the organisation at the other’s expense. For instance, what is the impact on productivity at the individual and organisational 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 levels of stress, enhancing an employee’s workplace well-being and performance? (Nimmi and Donald, 2022). Additionally, what opportunities exist for organisations to enhance employee happiness? (Spurk, Hirschi and Dries, 2019). Empirical studies can also help to identify innovative ways for organisations to attract and retain talent (McGregor, 2022), particularly as individuals seek purpose and meaning in their lives following the restrictions to daily life imposed by national governments in response to the COVID-19 pandemic (Afshari, 2021).

A further opportunity for future research concerning sustainable careers involves moving beyond the employer-employee relationship. We agree with Van der Heijden and colleagues (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 (2022) observes, these workers have high levels of mobility due to the temporary nature of projects and often experience multiple shifts between employee or contractor status across their career span. Moreover, we call for longitudinal research to encompass the time dimension of sustainable careers and consider how age and career stage may influence the individual and the relationship with their employer over time. We believe that the volatility and uncertainty in global labour markets, combined with rises by national governments to the qualifying age for state pension, will increasingly require people and organisations 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 behaviour, chance events, and career shocks across the career span (Van der Heijden et al., 2020).

Finally, we call for a blend of quantitative, qualitative and mixed methods studies to provide rich insights and understanding of the complex and multidimensional components of a sustainable career. 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 the benefit of both actors.

In conclusion, the conceptual framework developed in this paper draws together the fragmented literature from the fields of VB, HRM, and HRD. Taken together, we believe that the conceptual model and future research agenda can act as a catalyst for dialogue, challenge previously-held assumptions, and facilitate a more holistic approach to career and organisational sustainability.

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