# **Vulnerable Workers’ Employability Competences: the Role of Establishing Clear Expectations, Developmental Inducements and Social Organizational Goals**

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**Abstract**

Using an ethical approach to the study of employability, we question the mainstream approach to career self-direction. We focus on a specific category of employees that has been neglected in past research, namely vulnerable workers who have been unemployed for several years and who have faced multiple psychosocial problems. Building on the Ability-Motivation-Opportunity model, we examine how establishing clear expectations, developmental inducements and social organizational goals can foster employability competences of vulnerable workers. Our study took place in the particularly relevant context of social enterprises, which have a primary goal to enhance the employability competences of vulnerable workers. Multilevel analysis of data from 38 CEOs of social enterprises, 121 leaders and 594 workers, demonstrated that establishing clear expectations and developmental inducements enable vulnerable workers to anticipate and optimize their employability competences. Furthermore, a positive association was found between establishing clear expectations and the balance dimension of employability, yet only in social enterprises that prioritize social organizational goals, suggesting the need to recognize the extent organizational goals shape opportunities for vulnerable workers. Establishing clear expectations and developmental inducements can therefore enhance vulnerable workers’ employability competences in supportive contexts; however, there may be detrimental side effects to drifting away from social organizational goals.

Vulnerable Workers’ Employability Competences: the Role of Establishing Clear Expectations, Developmental Inducements and Social Organizational Goals

Vulnerable workers make part of the broad group of employed people often entering the workforce following long-term unemployment. Besides having a history of years of unemployment, vulnerable workers also typically have limited educational attainment and multiple interdependent psychosocial issues (Battilana et al., 2015; Crucke and Knockaert, 2016), such as (a history of) drug abuse, homelessness, debts, generation poverty, imprisonment, or mental and physical health problems. Because of their specific mix of life circumstances, these workers risk permanent exclusion from the labour market which makes them vulnerable. This exclusion is problematic. Vulnerable workers have a lower level of human capital due to their low education attainment in their childhood and adolescent years, and have a shortage of training and development in their adult years due to long-term unemployment. Participation in lifelong learning is marked by a Matthew effect: persons that already have a high level of human capital will increase their human capital even further through lifelong learning (Boeren, 2009). This results in ‘a gap between persons with a high level of human capital and persons with a low level of human capital’ (Knipprath and De Rick, 2015: 51). Moreover, economic inequality issues are often tied up in a vicious cycle of psycho-social issues of human capital, mental health, well-being and poverty (Neckerman and Torche, 2007). Thus vulnerable workers’ human capital gap is linked to greater economic inequality, with its concomitant negative consequences for learning outcomes and well-being (Wilkinson and Pickett, 2017). Learning outcomes and well-being are both essential for employability, namely the acquisition and fulfilment of employment and, if necessary, the creating of work (Van der Heijden, 2000), which is in turn essential to labour market prospects (De Vos et al., 2011; Van der Heijden et al., 2018). Hence vulnerable workers are in a vicious cycle that undermines their future employability. Despite the evident social and economic need to better understand vulnerable workers’ employability, it is striking that there is hardly any research on this category of employees, who are unable to rely on themselves for fostering their employability (Bal and Dóci, 2018).

Existing research on employability is linked to a discourse about employability ‘that emphasizes individual rather than societal or organizational responsibility’ (Roper et al., 2010: 673). As a consequence, employability research is characterized by a clear shortage on studies about vulnerable workers (Ashley and Empson, 2013), and contextual determinants such as organizational practices that foster the employees’ career (De Vos and Cambré, 2017). Organizational practices may be of particular relevance to foster the employability of vulnerable workers in social enterprises. These organizations have the potential to address complex social issues by combining the resources of a traditional business model with a social mission (Ramus and Vaccaro, 2017).

There are different kinds of social enterprises (Defourny and Nyssen, 2016), among which this study considers Work Integration Social Enterprises (WISE; hereafter referred to as social enterprises). These social enterprises are particularly suitable to study the employability of vulnerable workers because the latter are employed as the core work staff in such enterprises, instead of employing staff that should be predominantly aimed towards competing in the market. This implies that the organizational practices in social enterprises can serve their social mission by fostering these vulnerable workers’ employability (Crucke and Knockaert, 2016). Therefore, these organizations have ‘potential as key drivers of equitable and socially-inclusive economic growth’ (GECES, 2016: 7). However, while striving for financial sustainability, social enterprises may find themselves in a situation of mission drift from social goals to economic goals, thereby threatening their commitment to the social goals (Pache and Santos, 2013; Ramus and Vaccaro, 2017).

This study aims to examine whether and how organizational practices in social enterprises can enhance vulnerable workers’ employability. Building on the Ability-Motivation-Opportunity (AMO) model (Delery, 1998), we investigate how establishing clear expectations, developmental inducements and social organizational goals can foster employability competences of vulnerable workers by conducting a multilevel analysis of data from 38 CEOs of social enterprises, 121 leaders and 594 workers.

We contribute to the literature in at least two ways. First, we extend the scope of employability research from high potentials (Inkson et al., 2012), and, more recently, disabled workers (Baldridge and Kulkarni, 2017) and minorities (Wyatt and Silvester, 2015), to also incorporate vulnerable workers, which is a currently understudied group. While disabled workers and minorities face challenges, that are specific to their disability or social category, to find jobs and progress careers, vulnerable workers face multiple and intersecting psycho-social issues. Therefore, they are characterized by having lower employability competences, a larger distance to the labour market, and greater problems with finding and keeping employment. By studying vulnerable employees, we address the critique on the careers literature and wider discourse which privileges individuals relying on career self-direction (Inkson et al., 2012), and respond to calls for management scholars to engage in the inequality debate (Beal and Astakhova, 2017). Organizations in general and social enterprises in particular can apply practices that ‘disrupt the vicious cycles in which economic inequality is embedded’ (Riaz, 2015: 1090) by fostering their vulnerable workers’ employability. Second, AMO theory claims that employees’ i) ability to perform, ii) motivation to perform, and iii) opportunities to perform foster favorable human capital and motivational outcomes. We aim to extend AMO theory by positing that opportunity-related organizational practices can affect the ethical approach to HR practices that aim to foster employees’ ability and motivation to perform. Our line of reasoning is built upon linking the AMO model to the ethical perspective on HRM and the recent debate on mission drift in social enterprises. More specifically, the interactive perspective of the AMO model (Delery, 1998; Siemsen et al., 2008) is linked to the ethical perspective on HRM which fosters ‘an understanding of HRM as embedded into its socio-political context’ and which ‘is a moral activity (with potential to enhance quality of life)’ that can entail potential ‘divergent interests between employer and employee’ (Greenwood, 2013: 361, 359). In terms of these divergent interests, social organizational goals can be specifically relevant to social enterprises as the mission drift from social to economic organizational goals may be detrimental to vulnerable workers’ interests (Doherty et al., 2014; Ebrahim et al., 2014), as a result of market mechanisms that can weaken social enterprises’ ethical decision-making (Chell et al., 2016). The paper contributes by studying how potential mission drift of opportunity-related organizational practices (here: social organizational goals) function as the context in which ability (here: clear expectations) and motivation (here: developmental inducements) are embedded. By studying the potential detrimental effects of mission drift for vulnerable workers, we also add to recent debates on mission drift in social enterprises (Ramus and Vaccaro, 2017).

**Theoretical Framework and Hypotheses**

*The ethics of employability in mainstream labour markets*

In general, employability research is framed in HRM literature that utilizes a ‘unitarist frame of reference’, and thus supports a ‘shareholder-centred view of managerial responsibility whilst avoiding the discomfort of believing that doing so requires managers to treat employees instrumentally’. Obviously, this has ‘significant implications for the moral treatment of employees’ (Greenwood and Van Buren, 2017: 675). Accordingly, research on employability carries implicit understandings of the individual worker’s responsibility to find and keep a job in the mainstream labour market. These implicit understandings downplay the responsibility of organizations to enhance workers’ employability (Bal and Dóci, 2018). Accordingly, today’s dominant employment relationship entails less investments in employees than before (Audenaert et al., 2018). Employees are treated as free agents in the employment relationship, which is referred to as boundaryless careers (Arthur and Rousseau, 1996). However, risk is shifted from employers to employees. This makes maintenance of employability obligations ‘a minimal ethical requirement of organizations seeking to use the boundary career model as an employment practice’ (Van Buren, 2003: 136). In contrast with this dominant discourse, there is a necessity to study employability as an ethical responsibility of employers to employees as well. Employers also have a responsibility in maintaining their workers’ employability in the external labour market. When employers do not take this responsibility, this is likely to be ‘harmful for workers whose skills are fungible’ (Van Buren, 2003: 134).

*Employability competences of vulnerable workers*

While previous studies have often focused on occupational expertise and personal flexibility (e.g., De Cuyper et al., 2008; De Vos et al., 2011), we focused on two other employability competences.

First, in todays’ turbulent work environment, employees need to ‘take it upon themselves to acquire new skills and knowledge (build their human capital)’ (Smith, 2010: 288). Therefore, we focused on the extent to which vulnerable workers can anticipate and optimize their competences. Anticipating and optimizing competences is defined as ‘preparing for future work changes in a personal and creative manner in order to strive for the best possible job and career outcomes’ (Van der Heijde and Van der Heijden, 2006: 454), and has proven to be crucial for obtaining beneficial results in different work environments (see Van der Heijde and Van der Heijden, 2006; Van der Heijden et al., 2009b). Anticipating and optimizing competences are an important aspect of vulnerable workers’ employability because being up-to-date in domain-specific knowledge and skills is inevitable to keeping one’s job or, if necessary, finding a new job (Sanders and De Grip, 2004). However, due to multiple years of unemployment and a low socioeconomic standing in society, vulnerable workers have a significant deficit in their anticipating and optimizing competences (Battilana and Lee, 2014).

Second, success in one’s career is not only restricted to developing domain-specific competences, but also ‘a result of the balance between cognition and emotion’ (Van der Heijde and Van der Heijden, 2006: 452). We focused on the extent to which vulnerable workers gain balance in different and often opposing interests. Gaining balance is defined as ‘compromising between opposing employers’ interests as well as one’s own opposing work, career, and private interests (employee) and between employers’ and employees’ interests (Van der Heijde and Van der Heijden, 2006: 455-456). The emphasis on potential divergent interests, using an ethical perspective, makes it particularly relevant to study gaining balance as an outcome variable, because gaining balance pertains to divergent interests between the employer and the employee (i.e., economic versus career interests) (Van der Heijde and Van der Heijden, 2006). This may explain why less research interest has been devoted to gaining balance in the mainstream HRM perspective which assumes overlapping interests between both parties (i.e., employer and employee). Two divergent interests pertaining to gaining balance are particularly salient for vulnerable workers. First, the vulnerable worker’s current activities in the economic interests of the social enterprise may compete with their future career interests. In order to achieve the economic goals, social enterprises may structure work processes in small parts in order to make the tasks achievable for vulnerable workers which is crucial at the start of their employment. Some social enterprises may be tempted to keep structuring work in small parts because, as the worker becomes more experienced, it fosters the speed of their performance, which is in the economic interests of the social enterprise. Under these circumstances, vulnerable workers can function in the protected realm of the social enterprise, but are not working towards their future career interests. A *second* salient balance issue for vulnerable workers pertains to their own interest in striking a balance between their private life and their working life. Many vulnerable workers face multiple psychosocial problems due to a history of long-term unemployment, which are not erased upon finding a job (Drake and Bond, 2008). Whereas for many employees it is their work life that interferes with their private life, for vulnerable workers it is often the other way around: their psychosocially demanding private life interferes with their potential to find and maintain a job.

*AMO model and employability competences*

Running against the grain of an ethical approach to HRM (Wiley, 2000) which would assume a more pluralist approach, earlier scholarly work on the AMO model is mainly grounded in a mainstream, utilaristic perspective of HRM (Greenwood, 2013). AMO theory claims that organizational practices and management activities can enhance employees’ human capital and motivation in order to achieve favorable organizational outcomes by enhancing employees’ (i) ability to perform, (ii) motivation to perform, and (iii) opportunities to perform (Appelbaum, 2000). HRM practices can be clustered to support employee abilities, motivation, and opportunities to perform, which affect employee outcomes such as job performance. In turn, these employee outcomes affect the organization’s performance. The ability dimension has a stronger relationship with human capital, while the other two dimensions have a stronger relationship with motivation (Jiang et al., 2012).

The AMO model is usually (but not always) theorized starting from HRM practices such as selection, development, and performance management (Ehrnrooth and Björkman, 2012). In accordance with the need to situate our model in the specific context of our study (Johns, 2006), we select AMO variables that are specifically relevant for vulnerable workers, and argue that the management activities of establishing clear expectations and developmental inducements enable and motivate vulnerable workers to enhance their employability competences, particularly in opportune contexts where social enterprises focus on social organizational goals (see Figure 1). Even though social enterprises have social goals that map onto the employees’ interests in accordance with a pluralist approach (Greenwood and Van Buren, 2017), the duality of social organizational goals besides economic goals potentially generates mission drift for social enterprises (Ramus and Vaccaro, 2017).

**[Figure 1: here]**

Consistent with the interactive perspective of the AMO model (Delery, 1998; Siemsen et al., 2008), we approach employability from a novel multilevel perspective where (1) social organizational goals represent the context that is supportive of vulnerable workers’ opportunities which are formulated at the organizational level, (2) managerial and organizational practices that affect motivation and ability are overseen by team leaders, and (3) employees report affective states.

We examine the management activities of establishing clear expectations and offering developmental inducements as enhancing vulnerable workers’ motivation and ability to perform employability competences, and social organizational goals as a context supporting vulnerable workers’ opportunities. We chose these particular activities because they fit the social enterprise context, while also capturing the essence of the AMO model. First, the management activity of establishing clear expectations relates to organizational practices such as employee performance management and job analysis in order to structure work into feasible parts, and lead to employee outcomes of motivation and enhanced efficacy (i.e., ability). Second, the practice of developmental inducements relates to coaching, training and career development, which enables and motivates vulnerable workers to face their (future) work challenges. A meta-analysis of the AMO model supports our approach of viewing management activities (such as establishing clear expectations and developmental inducements) as affecting multiple components of this model (e.g., motivation and ability), and where such activities are supported by multiple organizational practices (e.g., performance management) (Jiang et al., 2012).

*Anticipating and optimizing competences*

In current labour markets employees have to enact their job and careers, owing to the increasing complexity of work and the difficulty to predict future work content (Van der Heijde and Van der Heijden, 2006; Van der Heijden and De Vos, 2015). Both proactivity, reflected in anticipating competences needed in the (near) future, and active adaptation, reflected in optimizing one’s competences, conceptually underpin the construct of employability (Van der Heijde and Van der Heijden, 2006; Fugate et al., 2004), and are required for meeting prospective labor market demands and protecting one’s sustainable employability.

According to the AMO model, some organizational practices can foster employees’ ability and motivation to engage in certain behaviours (Appelbaum, 2000). We expect that leaders in social enterprises can enable and motivate vulnerable workers to anticipate and optimize their competences by establishing clear expectations which encompass explicitly set, detailed, and clear work goals (Merchant, 1985). Whereas such work goals work against the grain of most job design theory recommendations that encourage high levels of job autonomy (Parker et al., 2001), vulnerable employees are likely to welcome such explicitly set and detailed work goals. Under self-determination theory (Deci and Ryan, 2000), vulnerable workers – having experienced multiple failures in the past – are likely to have frustrated competence needs. When work goals are detailed and explicitly set, vulnerable workers that face a skill gap for the regular labour market can be enabled to meet expectations. Their work goals provide vulnerable workers with small success experiences which help them fulfil basic competence needs.

Research supports that clear expectations are specifically crucial for vulnerable workers’ employability outcomes (e.g., Feather, 1992; Vansteenkiste et al., 2005). In particular, clear expectations are crucial for this category of workers in order to build their self-efficacy (Vansteenkiste et al., 2005), linked to their basic need to experience competence (Deci and Ryan, 2000). The AMO model, which draws on expectancy theory (Vroom, 1964), predicts that vulnerable workers will anticipate and optimize their competences more intensively when their leader fosters clear expectations. Consistent with self-determination theory and expectancy theory, clear expectations about required behaviour support employee motivation to engage in the behaviour, assuming that the goal is set at an obtainable level. Establishing clear expectations assist vulnerable workers in becoming fully aware about what is needed to fulfil certain in-role task performances, increasing their ability and motivation to perform, and enabling them to successfully anticipate and optimize the required behaviour and competences.

*Hypothesis 1a: Establishing clear expectations is positively related to vulnerable workers’ anticipation and optimization of competences.*

Developmental inducements entail a supporting and rewarding approach (Jia et al., 2014). By stressing the importance of self-development and skill utilization through offering developmental inducements, organizations stimulate and reward competency development that can enable and motivate employees to behave proactively and to engage in future developmental behaviours (Caesens and Stinglhamber, 2014). As such, developmental inducements foster employees to anticipate and optimize their competences, adding to their employability (De Vos et al., 2011; Sanders and De Grip, 2004; Van der Heijden et al., 2009a; Veld et al., 2015). Furthermore, empirical findings support that competency development foster the employability of low-skilled employees (Sanders and De Grip, 2004) and welfare clients (Deckop et al., 2006), and confirm a significant association between formal job-related learning and anticipating and optimizing competences (Van der Heijden et al., 2009a).

*Hypothesis 1b: Developmental inducements are positively related to vulnerable workers’ anticipation and optimization of competences.*

*The moderating role of social organizational goals*

Some organizations offer employees more opportunities in the work environment to exercise discretionary effort (Appelbaum, 2000). These opportunities provide the necessary support that enables action (Blumberg and Pringle, 1982; Boxall and Purcell, 2003; Delery and Roumpi, 2017). Building on the interactive perspective of the AMO model (Delery, 1998; Siemsen et al., 2008), we expect that social organizational goals provide opportunities for vulnerable workers to foster employability competences from clear expectations and developmental inducements. Establishing clear expectations and developmental inducements will be more opportune for vulnerable workers’ employability competences when social enterprises emphasize social organizational goals.

Social enterprises are ‘hybrid organizations’ (Doherty et al., 2014) and although they are set up to realize the social goal of the professional and social integration of vulnerable people, they operate in a commercial context. As a consequence, they also have to fulfil the expectations of customers and investors. Because of this dual mission, social enterprises face trade-offs when allocating resources to social activities, such as counselling, versus commercial activities (Battilana et al., 2015). Although social enterprises are organizations that ‘primarily pursue a social mission while also engaging in commercial activities to sustain their operations through sales of products and/or services’ (Battilana et al., 2015: 1658), social value creation may be compromised for capturing economic value (Ebrahim et al., 2014). Social enterprises are prone to mission drift where market performance goals ‘threaten their commitment to the accomplishment of their social mission’ (Ramus and Vaccaro, 2017: 308). In that case employing vulnerable workers will be less linked to normative values, that benefiting society by employing these people and developing their employability is the right thing to do, yet, rather more to instrumental values, that the social aims are used as an instrument to bolster organizational success (Walker et al., 2017). Rather than leading to mutual gains, lower emphasis on social organizational goals may generate outcomes that are appropriate from a unitarist perspective, but not from a normative, pluralistic perspective of HRM (Greenwood and Van Buren, 2017).

When social enterprises place lower emphasis on social organizational goals, establishing clear expectations and developmental inducements do not provide the same opportunities to employees to engage in discretionary efforts to anticipate and optimize their competences. We therefore hypothesize:

*Hypothesis 2: A focus on social organizational goals moderates the relationship between establishing clear expectations (2a) and development inducements (2b), and vulnerable workers’ anticipation and optimization of competences, such that this relationship is stronger when there is a higher focus on social organizational goals.*

As mentioned earlier, gaining balance pertains to one’s own divergent interests (i.e., work-life balance) and the divergent interests between the employer and the employee (i.e., economic versus career interests). In other words, it is about feeling more control over (possibly conflicting) demands in one’s work life, and protecting one’s work-life balance (Van der Heijde and Van der Heijden, 2006).

In the context of a lower emphasis on social organizational goals, establishing clear expectations and developmental inducements will have a lesser effect on employees achieving balance in their work and family life. Even where expectations are clear, employees will be pressured to perform more and to reach higher (i.e., less achievable) goals. In this context, developmental inducements may be demotivating rather than motivating because the emphasis is on high performance from vulnerable workers rather than competence development, and so employee development is less valued or overly geared toward performance imperatives. A main focus on short-term profit maximization and work intensification has indeed been found to hinder employee well-being (Kroon et al., 2009; Van de Voorde et al., 2012). Accordingly, this may threaten one’s opportunities to find balance. We thus hypothesize:

*Hypothesis 2: Social organizational goals moderate the relationship between establishing clear expectations (2c) and developmental inducements (2d), and vulnerable workers’ balance, such that this relationship is stronger when there is a higher focus on social organizational goals.*

**Method**

*Research setting in Flanders*

The recruitment procedure, as imposed and controlled by the Flemish government, requires that candidates for vulnerable worker positions must meet the following conditions: having low education attainment (no high-school degree), having more than five years of uninterrupted unemployment, and facing psycho-social limitations and difficulties. Work integration social enterprises in Flanders are private, risk-taking organizations that are supported by government subsidies, and are operating within highly competitive markets, such as packaging, assembling, gardening, and recycling (Crucke and Knockaert, 2016). As an ultimate goal, the Flemish government wants vulnerable workers to be integrated into the mainstream labour market (De Cuyper et al., 2015).

Although social enterprises are by definition focused primarily on social goals, this main focus is challenged by the need to remain competitive in the market as well. This is particularly the case for the studied social enterprises in Flanders in which there is a particular risk of mission drift due to recent institutional changes. We refer to the Flemish decree of 2013 on social enterprises. The sector of social enterprises is recently subjected to new laws that require them to channel vulnerable workers to the private job market. In addition, whereas there used to be a fixed subsidy for this category of workers, now the social enterprises get a subsidy linked to the individual’s degree of employability in the labour market. This situation puts these social enterprises in a less secure financial situation and thus may threaten their commitment to social goals.

Vulnerable workers have to be coached towards employment outside the social enterprise. However, government statistics suggest that this is a nearly impossible endeavour for many social enterprises as they have a very low share of people that transfer to the regular labour market (Departement Werk en Sociale Economie, 2015). In 2012, 5.4 percent (283) of the in total 5,270 vulnerable workers from social workshops (a specific type of work integration social enterprises that we study in this paper) transferred to the regular labour market. Only 22.5 percent of these were still employed after one year, which was the lowest success rate compared to other types of social enterprises (Jacobs and Lambert, 2014).

*Sample and procedures*

As mentioned, this study incorporates participants in social workshops in Flanders that provide employment to the most vulnerable workers in the labour market. These employees are characterized by low levels of literacy and anxiety issues. In 2015, we approached the entire sector of social workshops in Flanders, and out of a total of 94 enterprises with 4,731 vulnerable workers (Departement Werk en Sociale Economie, 2015), 38 social workshops agreed to participate in our multi-source study. By collecting data from three levels (CEOs, leaders, workers), we followed recommendations to combat common-method bias (Podsakoff et al., 2012).We distributed closed envelopes which were coded so that we could link data from the three sources.

First, we asked the 38 CEOs of participating enterprises to complete a questionnaire about organizational goals. The social workshops were on average 20.3 years old (SD = 13.0) and employed on average 82.3 vulnerable workers (SD = 62.4).

Second, 121 leaders (per organization: mean = 3.35; sd = 2.14) completed a questionnaire capturing information about the enacted organizational practices. The leaders were on average 42.4 years old (SD = 9.9), and had been employed by the organization for an average period of 6.1 years (SD = 5.4). Males represented 67.9% of the final sample. In addition, leaders were asked to assess four of their employees in terms of anticipation and optimization competences. This assessment led to data for 446 employees. The organizational practices pertained to how the group of vulnerable workers are managed in the social workshop, while the items for anticipation and optimization of competences pertained to four specific individual vulnerable workers in the team of the leader. The questions on individual workers were in separate sections in the survey.

Finally, we collected data from 594 vulnerable workers (per organization: mean = 16.42; sd = 10.13) themselves on their felt balance. The interviewer was available in the same room when participants completed the questionnaire, if necessary, to clarify items. When clarifying, the items were read aloud very slowly without changing the exact wordings, or the order of the wordings, in order to safeguard construct validity (Boynton et al., 2004). Demographic questions were kept to a minimum and were included at the end of the questionnaire because they may be threatening to this specific group of employees (Boynton et al., 2004). We did not ask for the number of years of unemployment, because we knew from conversations with multiple stakeholders involved with social workshops that many vulnerable workers felt ashamed about their unemployment. We strived to ask as little as possible from these respondents, and explicitly warranted anonymity, as they had very low levels of education, literacy, and are not used to ‘dealing with paper’. The vulnerable workers were on average 46.0 years old (SD = 10.7) and had been employed by the organization for an average period of 5.5 years (SD = 5.0). Males represented 70.6% of the final sample.

We chose different raters for the two employability competences because, first, we wanted to ask the most appropriate source based on the contents of the items, and second, we acknowledged the constraints in surveying vulnerable workers (see above). We therefore requested the leader to complete the anticipation and optimization of competences measure. The leader was an appropriate source to measure the extent to which four of their team members anticipate and optimize their competences. As leaders in social workshops work together closely with their employees in the production/service process, they are well placed for having information on the observable competence of anticipation and optimization. The involved questions command an understanding of the wider labour market which cannot be expected from vulnerable workers. On the other hand, since balance pertains to the experienced harmony of working, learning and living, and is highly subjective, we considered the vulnerable workers themselves to be best placed to respond.

*Measures*

All measures in this study were derived from previous research. For all items, the translation-back translation methodology was carefully followed (Van de Vijver and Hambleton, 1996). Unless mentioned otherwise, the items were scored on five-point scales, anchored on 1 for ‘strongly disagree’ and 5 for ‘strongly agree’.

*Establishing clear expectations.* We used three items from Merchant (1985) and asked leaders to indicate the extent to which the following statements were applicable to their vulnerable workers: ‘Employee expectations are specified in detail’, ‘The specific work rules and/or policy are used a lot’, and ‘Desired results are explicitly defined’.

*Developmental inducements.* We used three items from Jia et al. (2014): ‘Train employees on knowledge and skills for their jobs and career development’, ‘Care about employees’ satisfaction at work’, and ‘Value employees’ suggestions on work’. Leaders were asked to indicate the extent to which these statements were applicable across their vulnerable workers.

*Focus on social organizational goals.* This was assessed with a forced trade-off measure based on Autio et al. (2000). CEOs were asked to allocate 100 points across five goals to indicate how important these goals are for the organization. The five goals were: (1) maximizing profitability, (2) maximizing sales growth, (3) maximizing social value, (4) maximizing value of the firm for eventual acquisition, and (5) maximizing stability and longevity of the organization. By having to allocate points across five goals, raters are forced to make a trade-off which lowers socially desirable responses where everything is rated as important and, as such, variance is restricted (Autio et al., 2000). The points allocated for maximizing social value were used in calculating ‘focus on social organizational goals’.

*Anticipation and optimization of competences.* We used four items from Van der Heijde and Van der Heijden (2006) that reflect vulnerable workers’ anticipation and optimization of competences. Each item was scored on a 5-point scale, anchored on 1 for ‘Never’ and 5 for ‘Always’. The items were: ‘Takes responsibility for maintaining labour market value’, ‘Approaches the development of correcting his/her weaknesses in a systematic manner’, ‘Is focused on continuously developing him/herself’, and ‘During the past year, he/she was actively engaged in investigating adjacent job areas to see where success could be achieved’.

*Balance.* We used four items from Van der Heijde and Van der Heijden (2006) that reflect vulnerable workers’ balance. The items were: ‘My working, learning, and living are in harmony’, ‘My work efforts are in proportion to what I get back in return’, ‘The time I spend on my work and career development on the one hand and my personal development and relaxation on the other are evenly balanced’, and ‘After working, I am generally able to relax’. The selection of items was based on an interpretative approach building on the familiarity of three of the co-authors with vulnerable workers in social enterprises. One of the co-authors worked for two years as a trainer-consultant for vulnerable workers and their leaders in an employer organization for these social enterprises. In addition, two of the co-authors conducted a large study of the broader sector of social enterprises, and as such have developed a good insight into this segment of the labour market.

*Control variables.* At the organizational level, we controlled for age, organizational size, and net added value of the organization. It could be argued that better performing enterprises have more resources to invest in vulnerable workers’ employability. Net added value per employee was measured using data from the public annual accounting database Belfirst (amounts in EUR\*1000). At the leader level, we controlled for span of control and leader’s team tenure, as these may affect the attention leaders can devote to vulnerable workers’ employability. At the individual level, we controlled for employee age as it has been associated with employability ratings in previous research (e.g., Van der Heijden et al., 2009b), and for job tenure because employability is not static across one’s career (Sanders and De Grip, 2004).

**Results**

*Measurement analyses*

We conducted a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) to test whether the observed items factored under their intended constructs. As we have three datasets, we had to run the analyses separately for the measures in each of the datasets. Next to the χ²/df statistic, which is commonly reported in CFA research, we report the Standardized Root Mean Square (SRMR), the Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA), the Comparative Fit Index (CFI) and the Tucker-Lewis Index (TLI). To examine convergent validity, we assessed the statistical significance and the size of the factor loadings, using a criteria that standardized loadings should be 0.5 or higher. Finally, we studied the composite reliability (CR) of each measure to evaluate the reliability of the measures, considering values of 0.6 or higher as acceptable (Hair et al., 2017).

*Leader sample 1*

We performed a CFA on a two-factor model consisting of establishing clear expectations and developmental inducements. The two-factor model fit the data well: χ²/df = 1.66; SRMR = 0.05; RMSEA = 0.07; CFI = 0.98 and TLI = 0.96. All factor loadings were statistically significant and had values exceeding 0.5. In addition, we ran a one-factor model with all items loading on a single factor: χ²/df = 9.32; SRMR = 0.11; RMSEA = 0.24; CFI = 0.71 and TLI = 0.52. The two-factor model fit the data better than the one-factor model, indicating discriminant validity of the two constructs (Hair et al, 2010). Establishing clear expectations and development inducements both have a CR of 0.78, indicating good reliability.

*Leader sample 2*

The construct ‘anticipation and optimization of competences’ was subjected to CFA. The results indicate a good fit: χ²/df = 2.75; SRMR = 0.03; RMSEA = 0.08; CFI = 0.98 and TLI = 0.93. All factor loadings are statistically significant and have values exceeding 0.5. The value of the CR is 0.67 exceeding the threshold of 0.6.

*Employee sample*

We conducted CFA on a one-factor model consisting of the four items to measure balance. The results demonstrate a good fit: χ²/df = 2.51; SRMR = 0.02; RMSEA = 0.05; CFI = 0.99 and TLI = 0.97. All factor loadings are statistically significant and have values of 0.5 or higher. Construct’s CR is 0.65 and exceeds the threshold of 0.6.

*Preliminary analyses*

The means, standard deviations, and correlations are shown in Table I.

**[Table I: here]**

*Hypotheses testing*

Considering the nested nature of our data where workers were nested within leaders and organizations, Hierarchical Linear Modelling (in HLM7) was used to test the hypothesized multilevel relationships. Estimates were conducted with full maximum likelihood and grand-mean centred variables (Hox, 2010). We reported deviance ‘which indicates how well the model fits the data. In general, models with a lower deviance fit better than models with a higher deviance’ (Hox, 2010: 16). All measures were standardized before conducting the HLM analysis, because different scales were utilized. Tables II and III present the HLM results.

**[Tables II and III: here]**

We began with an intercept-only model, without including any predictors. The between-team errors for both dimensions of employability (i.e., anticipation and optimization, and balance) showed significant variance (*p* < 0.05). Therefore, we could proceed to examine a multilevel model. As shown in Tables II and III, we included the control variables in the first model. Model 1 in Table II shows that net added value per employee was positively related (*β* = 0.09, *p* < 0.001) to anticipation and optimization. Model 1 in Table III shows that the net added value per employees was positively related (*β* = 0.05, *p* < 0.01) to balance, while leader’s team tenure was negatively related (*β* = -0.11, *p* < 0.05) to balance.

Model 2 of Table II shows that establishing clear expectations was positively associated with anticipation and optimization (*β* = 0.18, *p* < 0.001), which supports Hypothesis 1a. Moreover, in line with Hypothesis 1b, developmental inducements was positively associated with anticipation and optimization (*β* = 0.16, *p* < 0.05). The results indicate that the effect of establishing clear expectations on anticipation and optimization are similar in size to the effect of developmental inducements. A visual inspection of the QQ plot of the residuals (Hox, 2010) in combination with formal statistical tests of normality (Cohen et al., 2013) suggested that the assumption of normality was met.

Model 3 of Table II shows that neither support was found for the cross-level moderation of a focus on social goals on the relationship between establishing clear expectations and anticipation and optimization (i.e., Hypothesis 2a), nor for the cross-level moderation of a focus on social goals on the relationship between developmental inducements and anticipation and optimization (i.e., Hypothesis 2b).

However, Model 3 of Table III shows support for the cross-level moderation as stated in Hypothesis 2c. A focus on social organizational goals was found to moderate the relationship between establishing clear expectations and balance (*β* = 0.09, *p* < 0.01). Since homoscedasticity may result in spurious cross-level interactions, we tested for the absence of homoscedasticity. Conducing the Levene’s test using Model 2 (1,429, *p* > 0.05) provides support for homoscedasticity of the residual errors of establishing clear expectations; namely the variance of the residual errors is the same in all groups. Also, a visual inspection of the QQ plot of the residuals (Hox, 2010) in combination with formal statistical tests of normality (Cohen et al., 2013) suggested that the assumption of normality was met. Figure 2 plots the moderation effect (Dawson, 2014). For organizations with higher social organizational goals (i.e., +1SD above the mean), the relationship between establishing clear expectations and balance is positive. For organizations with lower social organizational goals (i.e., -1SD below the mean), the relationship between establishing clear expectations and balance is negative. For organizations with a mean value of social organizational goals, the slope of establishing clear expectations–balance is flat. Finally, no support was found for the cross-level moderation of a focus on social organizational goals on the relationship between developmental inducements and balance (i.e., Hypothesis 2d).

**[Figure 2: here]**

**Discussion**

This study aims to examine whether and how organizational practices in social enterprises can enhance employability competences. We found that social enterprises that establish clear expectations and developmental inducements can foster vulnerable workers to anticipate and optimize their employability competences. However, and crucially, social enterprises’ focus on social organizational goals interacts with the extent to which leaders can foster vulnerable workers’ balance by establishing clear expectations to such an extent that it determines whether the impact of clear expectations on balance is positive or negative.

*Theoretical implications*

Our first contribution pertains to developing a better understanding of the employability of vulnerable workers. Employability debates have mainly focussed on privileged workers rather than on vulnerable ones (Ashley and Empson, 2013). In recent years, employability research has been extended from managerial, professional and technical employees (Inkson et al., 2012), to disabled employees (Baldridge and Kulkarni, 2017), and minorities (Wyatt and Silvester, 2015). We add to this extension by focusing on vulnerable workers on the labour market. Although developing, maintaining, and even enhancing one’s employability is to a large extent regarded as the employee’s own responsibility (Clarke, 2008; Roper et al., 2010), all of this is unlikely to be reachable for vulnerable workers who are currently employed in a WISE that ultimately aims to channel them to the mainstream labour market (Battilana and Lee, 2014). In contrast with the responsibility of career self-direction, and in support of the argument that also organizational factors can affect employability (Forrier et al., 2009; De Vos and Cambré, 2016), our outcomes suggest the need for recognizing factors beyond the control of vulnerable workers themselves. Specifically, establishing clear expectations and developmental inducements contribute to vulnerable workers anticipating and optimizing their competences. Vulnerable workers thus address the problem of their relatively low human capital linked to the Matthew effect (Boeren, 2009; Knipprath and De Rick, 2015), which is a result of negative learning experiences in the educational system (Wilkinson and Pickett, 2017). As such, our research supports the relevance of employers and leaders for taking responsibility to support vulnerable workers, in line with the ethical approach to HRM that underscores the role of organizational practices and management activities in the broader socio-political context (Greenwood, 2013), and indicates ways for managers and organizations to disrupt the vicious cycles of economic inequality (Riaz, 2015). Achieving more balance may allow vulnerable workers to better address the problem of the vicious cycle of low well-being and psychological health that is associated with their economic inequality (Wilkinson and Pickett, 2017).

Our second contribution pertains to showing the relevance of the AMO model of HRM from an ethical perspective. This study further extends the scarce research that has studied the AMO model from an ethical perspective (Guerci et al., 2015) by finding support for social organizational goals as a moderator. For social enterprises that drift away from social organizational goals, a negative association was found between establishing clear expectations and the balance dimension of employability. This stands in sharp contrast with social enterprises that prioritise social organizational goals for which a positive association was found between establishing clear expectations and the balance dimension of employability. Hence, our findings extend the AMO model with an ethical perspective on HRM supporting the view that divergent interests between the employer and the employee (i.e., the tension between pursuing economic versus social organizational goals) can potentially affect employees’ quality of life (Greenwood, 2013), by drifting away from social organizational goals and in doing so undermine the extent HRM practices can benefit career interests of vulnerable workers. This supports the idea that mission drift away from social organizational goals is detrimental to vulnerable workers interests’ (Doherty et al., 2014; Ebrahim et al., 2014) because it weakens social enterprises’ ethical decision-making (Chell et al., 2016). When social enterprises are exposed to institutional and economic pressures their attention may drift away from social organizational goals. As a consequence, establishing clear expectations may lead to work intensification in which vulnerable workers get less time to balance their work lives and their private lives or get less opportunities to balance their contribution to organizational economic goals versus their personal career goals. Indeed, when employers do not take their ethical responsibility in fostering employability, this is likely to harm vulnerable workers (Van Buren, 2003).

*Limitations and future research*

We studied employability by asking vulnerable workers to assess balance while the leaders were asked to assess the extent to which their employees’ anticipate and optimize their competences. Although the latter approach is assumed to be more accurate than using presumably more lenient self-ratings (Thornton, 1980; see also Van der Heijde and Van der Heijden, 2006; Van der Heijden, 2000), and may have prevented common-method bias (Podsakoff et al., 2012), the use of two different raters for the employability competences may raise concerns that the findings are affected by measurement issues. However, in support for the validity of our measurements, we found a significant link of net added value (from external public accounting data) with both anticipation and optimization of competences (measured from the leader) and balance (measured from the employee). Furthermore, future research could extend to other employability competences when studying vulnerable workers.

*Managerial implications*

Employability is regarded as a crucial employee behaviour and individual employee responsibility in order to thrive in the labour market. Our study has two main implications for organizations that strive to make vulnerable workers more employable. First, it is the ethical responsibility of leaders to go against forces for a mainstream approach to HRM and to foster vulnerable worker’s employability. Leaders play a crucial role in addressing vulnerable worker’s self-efficacy beliefs by establishing clear expectations, and providing developmental inducements. Therefore, organizations should support leaders of vulnerable workers in their role. Second, this paper indicates that managers of (social) enterprises should strive for social organizational goals which provide vulnerable workers with the opportunity to advance their felt balance from organizational practices. A major insight is that vulnerable workers are receptive to organizational practices aimed at increasing their employability, however, in some organizations there is a concern that their well-being may be negatively affected in contexts where social organizational goals are low, which undermines the point of the intervention.

**Compliance with Ethical Standards**

*Human and Animal Rights*

This article does not contain any studies with animals performed by any of the authors.

*Ethical Approval*

All procedures performed in studies involving human participants were in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional and/or national research committee and with the 1964 Helsinki declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards.

*Informed Consent*

Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.​

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**Table I. Descriptives and Correlations**

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Level** | **Variable** | **Mean (SD)** | **Correlation** | | | |
|  |  |  | **1** | **2** | **3** | **4** |
| Level 1: Employee | Age | 45.97 (10.66) | - |  |  |  |
|  | Job tenure | 5.48 (5.03) | 0.36\*\*\* | - |  |  |
|  | Balance | 3.47 (.80) | 0.03 | 0.21 | [α = 0.65] |  |
|  | Anticipation and optimization | 3.13  (.80) | - | - | - | [α = 0.67] |
| Level 2: Leader | Span of control | 12.29 (9.58) | - |  |  |  |
|  | Leader's team tenure | 5.36 (4.66) | 0.13 | - |  |  |
|  | Establishing clear expectations | 3.26 (.62) | 0.08 | 0.00 | [α = 0.77] |  |
|  | Developmental inducements | 4.17  (.53) | 0.19\* | 0.12 | 0.40\*\* | [α = 0.78] |
| Level 3: Organization | Age organization | 20.33 (13.02) | - |  |  |  |
|  | Net added value per employee | 35.87 (28.42) | -0.04 | - |  |  |
|  | Focus on social organizational goals | 43.67 (15.41) | -0.20 | -0.09 | - |  |
| Notes: \* *p* < 0.05, \*\* *p* < 0.01, \*\*\* *p* < 0.001 | | | | | | |

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Table II** | | | | |
| **Results of Multilevel Modelling Analysis for Anticipation and Optimization of Competences** | | | | |
|  |  | Model 1 (Model with controls) | Model 2 (Direct cross-level effects) | Model 3 (Cross-level moderation) |
| Employee level | |  |  |  |
|  | Intercept | 0.03 (0.08) | 0.02 (0.07) | 0.01 (0.07) |
| Leader level | |  |  |  |
|  | Span of control | -0.10 (0.13) | -0.11 (0.12) | -0.10 (0.12) |
|  | Leader's team tenure | -0.02 (0.05) | -0.01 (0.05) | -0.01 (0.06) |
|  | Establishing clear expectations |  | 0.18 \*\*\* (0.05) | 0.20 \*\*\* (0.06) |
|  | Developmental inducements |  | 0.16 \* (0.07) | 0.18 \*\* (0.06) |
| Organizational level | |  |  |  |
|  | Net added value per employee | 0.09 \*\*\* (0.03) | 0.02 (0.03) | 0.02 (0.03) |
|  | Age | 0.08 (0.07) | -0.01 (0.08) | 0.01 (0.07) |
|  | Focus on social organizational goals |  | -0.07 (0.05) | -0.10 (0.06) |
| Cross-level moderation | |  |  |  |
|  | Establishing clear expectations x Focus on social organizational goals |  |  | 0.06 (0.06) |
|  | Developmental inducements x Focus on social organizational goals |  |  | 0.03 (0.04) |
| Deviance | | 1113 | 1098 | 1096 |
| Notes: N = 446 (individual level), 112 (team level), 38 (organizational level). Values in parentheses are standard errors. Standardized values were used. \* *p* < 0.05, \*\* *p* < 0.01, \*\*\* *p* < 0.001 | | | | |

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Table III** | | | | |
| **Results of Multilevel Modelling Analysis for Balance** | | | | |
|  |  | Model 1 (Model with controls) | Model 2 (Direct cross-level effects) | Model 3 (Cross-level moderation) | |
| Employee level | |  |  |  | |
|  | Intercept | 0.02 (0.05) | 0.02 (0.05) | 0.02 (0.05) | |
|  | Age | 0.08 (0.05) | 0.08 (0.05) | 0.08 (0.05) | |
| Leader level | |  |  |  | |
|  | Span of control | 0.17 (0.09) | 0.17 (0.09) | 0.18 (0.09) | |
|  | Leader's team tenure | -0.11 \* (0.05) | -0.11 \* (0.05) | -0.12 \* (0.05) | |
|  | Establishing clear expectations |  | 0.01 (0.04) | 0.01 (0.04) | |
|  | Developmental inducements |  | 0.06 (0.04) | 0.08 (0.05) | |
| Organizational level | |  |  |  | |
|  | Net added value per employee | 0.05 \*\* (0.01) | 0.03 (0.02) | 0.03 (0.02) | |
|  | Age | -0.10 (0.07) | -0.10 (0.07) | -0.10 (0.07) | |
|  | Focus on social organizational goals |  | 0.04 (0.05) | 0.03 (0.05) | |
| Cross-level moderation | |  |  |  | |
|  | Establishing clear expectations x Focus on social organizational goals |  |  | 0.09 \*\* (0.03) | |
|  | Developmental inducements x Focus on social organizational goals |  |  | -0.05 (0.04) | |
| Deviance | | 1501 | 1499 | 1496 | |
| Notes: N = 594 (individual level), 121 (team level), 38 (organizational level). Values in parentheses are standard errors. Standardized values were used. \* *p* < 0.05, \*\* *p* < 0.01 | | | | | |