



Employability among the long-term unemployed: A futile quest or worth the effort?



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 22 August 2012

Available online 17 November 2012

Keywords:

Employability

Job-search

Reemployment

Long-term unemployment

Reemployment interventions

ABSTRACT

Unemployment bears many negative consequences for both individuals and societies. Particularly the long-term unemployed face poor chances of finding reemployment, and many recommendations issued in the regular unemployment literature may not apply to them. Therefore, the current study investigates whether employability (Fugate et al., 2004) may help finding reemployment among those who have been unemployed for years. Specifically, we examine whether employability can foster job search and the chance on finding reemployment above and beyond the barriers that long-term unemployed people so often face. Additionally, we investigate whether reemployment interventions can contribute to long-term unemployed people's employability. The present study assessed long-term unemployed people's employability at two points in time ($nT1 = 2541$, $nT2 = 897$). Results show that employability fosters job search and the chance on finding reemployment among long-term unemployed people, although not all employability dimensions contributed equally to job search and reemployment. Moreover, reemployment interventions contributed to people's development of employability, although the effects were relatively small. Taken together, our study demonstrates the significant role of employability in the reemployment process, thereby extending the notion of employability from active members of the workforce to the long-term unemployed. We discuss that reemployment research and practice should focus on longterm unemployed people's employability, and that reemployment services should take a more personcentered approach in helping them to find reemployment.

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1. Introduction

Unemployment is a very costly problem for both societies and individuals. For societies, it bears costs in the social welfare system and in economy production (cf. Sinfield, *in press*; Stenberg & Westerlund, 2008), whereas for individuals, it means a loss of earnings and job-skills, and often a negative impact on their psychological well-being and that of their families (cf. McKee-Ryan & Maitoza, *in press*; Paul & Moser, 2009; Wanberg, 2012). As the time of unemployment lengthens, these negative consequences are likely to aggravate and people's chances of finding reemployment decrease due to the loss of job-skills, motivation, and job-related networks (Aarons, Mazumder, & Schechter, 2010). To reduce the risk and amount of long-term unemployment, many governments have introduced reemployment interventions. Such interventions generally aim to increase people's job search activities and employability (i.e., their skills, knowledge and attitudes that together form the ability to find and keep a job; cf. Fugate, Kinicki, & Ashforth, 2004), and with that their chances of eventually finding reemployment (cf. Dolton & O'Neill, 2002; Graversen & Van Ours, 2008; Klepinger, Johnson, & Joesch, 2002; McQuaid & Lindsay, 2005; Petrongolo, 2009).

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Although past research has shown that the chances of finding reemployment increase with job seekers' employability and job search activities (e.g. McArdle, Waters, Briscoe, & Hall, 2007; McKee-Ryan, Song, Wanberg, & Kinicki, 2005), it remains unclear whether these findings are equally applicable to the long-term unemployed – those who have been unemployed for over a year. After years of being unemployed, finding reemployment is not as easy as it is for regular unemployed job seekers: long-term unemployed people face a range of personal-circumstantial barriers to work, such as a lack of work experience, depleted job networks (Wanberg, Kanfer, & Banas, 2000), stigma associated with unemployment (Gallie & Russell, 1998; Heslin, Bell, & Fletcher, 2012; Vishwanath, 1989) and physical and psychological barriers to work (cf. Lindsay, 2002; McQuaid & Lindsay, 2002; Wanberg, Hough, & Song, 2002). For some, even participation in society can pose serious challenges (Groot et al., 2008; McQuaid & Lindsay, 2002). The decreased chance of finding reemployment faced by the long-term unemployed might not necessarily be due to their lack of employability as such, but rather to the fact that employability plays too little a role in finding reemployment when taking these barriers into account. For example, when struggling with physical or psychological problems, these problems may overshadow someone's skills and knowledge when trying to find reemployment.

In this study, we investigate whether employability raises the chance on finding reemployment among the long-term unemployed above and beyond the barriers to employment they face. To the best of our knowledge, our study is the first to address the role of employability in finding reemployment among this currently understudied group. By empirically investigating the relationship between employability and reemployment success among the long-term unemployed, we aim to extend the notion that 'one can be employable without necessarily being in employment' (McArdle et al., 2007, p.248) to those who have been unemployed for years. Additionally, given that reemployment interventions aim to enhance people's employability, it is important to study if these interventions are also beneficial for the long-term unemployed. That is, if they increase their employability. All in all, it is of high practical relevance to get more insight into the precise role that employability may play in finding reemployment for the long-term unemployed, as it can help to improve these reemployment interventions.

1.1. Employability

Fugate et al. (2004) presented employability as a useful person-centered psycho-social construct for reemployment research, as employable individuals may suffer less psychological harm from job-loss and subsequent unemployment, may more likely engage in job search and more likely gain high-quality reemployment. Employability is conceptualized as 'a form of work specific active adaptation that enables workers to identify and realize career opportunities' (Fugate et al., 2004, p.16). Employability likely facilitates movement between jobs both within and between organizations (Morrison & Hall, 2002) and, in reemployment terms, enhances the likelihood of gaining reemployment (McArdle et al., 2007).

Fugate et al.'s (2004) model of employability comprises four interrelated dimensions: adaptability, social capital, human capital and career identity. While social and human capital provide the ability-related foundations of employability, adaptability and career identity offer more of the cognitive-affective and motivational foundations (cf. Fugate et al., 2004). Each dimension consists of different skills, knowledge and behaviors that together create the ability to find and keep a job. The first dimension of employability is adaptability: a readiness to cope and a willingness to explore one's career possibilities (Savickas, 2005). Career adaptability includes looking around (i.e. career exploration) and ahead (i.e. career planning) at different career options (Savickas, 2002). Exploring one's possibilities and engaging in planning activities such as setting and pursuing career goals has been shown to play an important role in the reemployment process, both in terms of gaining reemployment (McArdle et al., 2007) and for the quality of the reemployment gained (Koen, Klehe, Van Vianen, Zikic, & Nauta, 2010; Zikic & Klehe, 2006). The second dimension, social capital, reflects a more interpersonal aspect of employability, and describes someone's social skills as well as the social network and support that they can draw upon. Here, it concerns both formal and informal job-related networks – or 'knowing-whom' competencies (DeFillippi & Arthur, 1994) – known to impact and facilitate reemployment success (e.g. McKee-Ryan et al., 2005; Wanberg, Kanfer, & Rotundo, 1999). The third dimension, human capital, refers to personal factors that may affect one's chances of finding reemployment (McArdle et al., 2007). These 'knowing-how' competencies (DeFillippi & Arthur, 1994) include experience, training, skills and knowledge. Finally, the fourth dimension of employability comprises career identity: a 'cognitive compass' to navigate career goals. Career identity reflects 'knowing-why' competencies (DeFillippi & Arthur, 1994) such as individual work values and motivation to work (Fugate et al., 2004). With regard to reemployment, career identity reflects the centrality that unemployed people place on employment, which provides guidance in making decisions and establishing reemployment goals (McArdle et al., 2007).

1.2. Employability among the long-term unemployed

McArdle et al. (2007) empirically tested Fugate et al.'s (2004) employability model among active job seekers and found that employability was positively related to finding reemployment 6 months later. They argued that adaptability is beneficial to the individual as well as attractive to potential employers (McLaughlin, 1995), that social capital can provide access to potential employers, and that career identity provides employment goals and directions to pursue reemployment. McArdle et al. also found a strong positive relationship between employability and job search, suggesting that employable individuals take a proactive approach to engage in the labor market: they may be responsive to their situation of unemployment by engaging in goal-directed behavior such as job search. Thus, improvements in employability are not only characterized by an increase in adaptability, social capital, human capital and career identity (Fugate et al., 2004), but employability also increases the possibility to subsequently

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