

Employability: A Psycho-Social Construct, its Dimensions, and Applications

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## Employability: A Psycho-Social Construct, its Dimensions, and Applications

We examine the idea that an individual's *employability* subsumes a host of person-centered constructs needed to deal effectively with the career-related changes occurring in today's economy. We argue that employability represents a form of work specific (pro)active adaptability that consists of three dimensions – career identity, personal adaptability, and social and human capital. Reciprocal relationships among these dimensions are also discussed. The impact of employability on organizational behavior is illustrated through applications to the research literatures on job loss and job search.

**KEY WORDS: EMPLOYABILITY, ADAPTABILITY, JOB LOSS**

## Employability: A Psycho-Social Construct, its Dimensions, and Applications

We are becoming fluid and many-sided. Without quite realizing it, we have been evolving a sense of self, appropriate to the restlessness and flux of our time. This mode of being differs radically from that of the past... We feel ourselves buffeted about by unmanageable historical forces and social uncertainties... our behavior tends to be ad hoc, more or less decided upon as we go along... But rather than collapse under these threats and pulls, the self turns out to be surprisingly resilient... We find ourselves evolving a self of many possibilities. (Lifton, 1993: 1)

Alluding to the Greek god of many forms, Proteus, the above excerpt describes the protean self (Lifton, 1993). In essence, the ever-growing dynamism of the world today requires individuals to be increasingly fluid and adaptable. This is particularly true of the rapidly changing career landscape, prompting Hall (1986, 1996, 2002; Hall & Mirvis, 1995) to write of the “protean worker.” More specifically, Hall and his colleagues contend that to be successful within today’s work environment, workers need to be highly adaptable and manage multiple identities (Hall, 1976, 2002; Hall & Mirvis, 1995; Mirvis & Hall, 1994).

Traditionally, careers occurred within the context of a single or limited number of organizations (i.e., the bounded or organizational career)—as was the case under the old, paternalistic employer-employee contract (e.g., Hall & Mirvis, 1995). Currently, however, people more commonly experience largely self-managed, boundaryless careers comprised of many positions with multiple organizations and even industries (Arthur, 1994; Arthur & Rousseau, 1996; Hall, 2002; Leana & Rousseau, 2000; Mirvis & Hall, 1994). Due to the increased pace of change, the boundaries between jobs, between organizations, and between life roles (e.g., parent, leisure) are becoming blurred, and individuals are required to negotiate a far greater number and variety of role transitions (Ashforth, 2001). For instance, despite the record economic expansion in the United States during the 1990’s, corporate decks were shuffled and reshuffled, resulting in persistent and substantial waves of job loss. The extreme career and

psychological impact on displaced workers highlighted the need for effective coping (Kinicki, Prussia, & McKee-Ryan, 2000). Further, the persistent restructuring precipitated challenges for survivors as well: they had to deal with the loss of valued coworkers, the responsibilities that were shouldered by those coworkers, and threats to their own job “security” (cf. Kammeyer-Mueller, Liao, & Arvey, 2001).

Survival in this turbulent career environment requires workers to continually manage change—in themselves and their contexts. Thus, a person’s ability and willingness to adapt is essential to career success (Hall, 2002; Pulakos, Arad, Donovan, & Plamondon, 2000). Historically, organizational scholars characterized employee adaptation as reactive, that is, as a response to environmental change. More recently, employees have been characterized as more proactive, as *initiating* change. For example, numerous person-centered constructs—proactive behaviors (Crant, 2000), personal initiative (Frese & Fay, 2001), proactive personality (Bateman & Crant, 1993), taking charge (Morrison & Phelps, 1999), proactive socialization (Saks & Ashforth, 1997), and so on—conceive of employees as active agents who initiate improvement in their work situations. Building on this theme, the purpose of this paper is to introduce the construct of *employability*.

We propose that an individual’s employability subsumes a host of person-centered constructs that combine synergistically to help workers effectively adapt to the myriad of work-related changes occurring in today’s economy. Employability is a psycho-social construct that embodies individual characteristics that foster adaptive cognition, behavior, and affect, and enhance the individual-work interface. This person-centered emphasis coincides with the major shift in responsibility for career management and development from employers to employees (e.g., Hall & Mirvis, 1995). In short, the onus is on employees to acquire the knowledge, skills,

abilities, and other characteristics (KSAOs) valued by current and prospective employers. Accordingly, the component dimensions comprising the construct of employability predispose individuals to improve their situations (pro)actively (cf. Seibert, Kraimer, & Crant, 2001) and be malleable over time—“changeable”—in order to meet the demands of the environment (Chan, 2000).

Although the term employability has been used in various streams of literature—public policy and employment (Kossek, Huber, & Lerner, 2003), vocational counseling for disabled persons (Bricout & Bentley, 2000), and economics (Lefresne, 1999)—surprisingly little research explicates its foundation or discusses its role in influencing a host of organizational behaviors. We begin by expanding on our definition of employability and discussing its theoretical foundations. The three component dimensions of employability—career identity, personal adaptability, and social and human capital—are presented next. We then examine relations between these component dimensions and employability and among the dimensions themselves, focusing on the role of reciprocal determinism. We also compare and contrast employability with several related individual difference variables in order to place the construct within a nomological network of person-centered variables. The final section illustrates the relevance of employability to organizational behavior, as we discuss the implications of employability for employees in transition—coping with job loss and engaging in job search.

### Foundations of Employability

Employability is conceptualized as a form of work specific active adaptability that enables workers to identify and realize career opportunities. As such, employability facilitates the movement between jobs, both within and between organizations. Although employability does not assure actual employment, we contend that it enhances an individual’s likelihood of

gaining employment. An individual is employable to the extent that he or she can parlay person factors effectively to negotiate environmental demands (Chan, 2000). The construct focuses largely on person-centered factors (i.e., career identity, personal adaptability, and social and human capital—described in detail later) because individuals have virtually no input into employers' hiring criteria, such as years of experience and job specific skills (external factors).

Person-centered active adaptation and proactivity—as described by Ashford and Taylor (1990) and Crant (2000)—conceptually underpin the construct of employability. Ashford and Taylor describe employees' adaptation to changes at work as an active process, such that employees who are more active in their efforts adapt more successfully. According to Ashford and Taylor, employees in transition must actively engage their work environments to maintain three conditions necessary for effective adaptation. First, employees must obtain adequate information regarding their environment, as well as feedback regarding their relationship or status within the environment. Second, employees need to possess appropriate internal conditions for adaptability. Specifically, certain individual attributes (e.g., optimism and self-efficacy) and cognitions (e.g., schemas) are required to enable individuals to negotiate the often numerous internal and external challenges of change. Third, employees must maintain flexibility or freedom of movement. They must be willing and able to change behaviors, cognitions, and affect.

Our conceptualization of employability builds on and extends the work of Ashford and Taylor (1990). We build on their work and assert that employability embodies (pro)active adaptability in the work domain. Individuals who possess high levels of employability are predicted to reap the benefits of active adaptability. We extend Ashford and Taylor's work by discussing how an individual's career identity constitutes a key driver of employability. As

expanded upon later, career identity is one's self-definition in the career context, describing "who I am" or "who I want to be." Career identity acts as a cognitive compass that motivates one to actively adapt in order to realize (or create) opportunities that match one's aspirations (cf. Ashforth & Fugate, 2001).

To explicate further, employability influences the adaptation requirements delineated by Ashford and Taylor (1990). Regarding the first requirement, the identification and realization of opportunities necessitates that employable individuals procure information regarding the environment and one's personal qualifications (feedback). People attend to and act on information that is relevant to salient career identities (Ashforth & Fugate, 2001; Berzonsky, 1990, 1992). As for the second requirement, employable people, by definition, possess a collection of individual attributes necessary for effective adaptation—career identity, personal adaptability, and social and human capital (each described later)—some of which subsume individual characteristics suggested by Ashford and Taylor. For employable people, however, career identities cognitively cohere these elements while providing energy and direction to their influence. Pertaining to the third requirement, employability enhances alternatives and facilitates personal change and job changes. Employable people consider and pursue alternatives consistent with their salient career identities (cf. Ashforth & Fugate, 2001), and are predisposed to personal change (personal adaptability).

In addition to fostering active adaptability, employability also predisposes individuals to adapt or change proactively. In support of this assertion, Crant's (2000) review of proactive behaviors at work shows that an action or proactive orientation, rather than one that is passive or reactive, yields many benefits for employees. For example, proactivity in the work domain enhances job performance (e.g., Crant, 1995) and career outcomes (e.g., Seibert, Crant, &

Kraimer, 1999). An action orientation facilitates individuals altering the work situation to suit their own needs, which is, in part, motivated by the career identity dimension of employability. Individuals with high employability actively engage the situation, learning and asserting whatever influence is possible to alter the situation to fit their own occupational interests and fulfill desired career identities. At the same time, they alter their own cognitions and behaviors to optimize the situation and outcomes, such as job satisfaction and employment opportunities. In short, proactive efforts are manifestations of employability.

Furthermore, proactively engaging one's work environment reduces uncertainty and anxiety (Saks & Ashforth, 1996), which improves adaptational outcomes (e.g., performance and satisfaction) (Ashford & Black, 1996). For instance, Wanberg and Kammeyer-Mueller (2000) found that proactive socialization increased job satisfaction and reduced intentions to quit. Moreover, proactivity affords employees a measure of perceived control that those with passive or reactive orientations do not have (cf. Aspinwall & Taylor, 1997; Crant, 2000). Research related to perceived control in the work domain shows that the desire to obtain a sense of control drives individuals to reduce uncertainty and expand alternative courses of action (e.g., Ashford & Black, 1996) and has positive implications for employee coping with organizational change (e.g., Scheck & Kinicki, 2000). Dispositionally, individuals with high employability are likely to believe that they can identify a wider array of career alternatives and opportunities and realize those they pursue; behaviorally, those with high employability are likely to assert themselves, thereby reducing uncertainty. For example, increased perceptions of control improved managers' adjustment to organizational change (Judge, Thoresen, Pucik, & Welbourne, 1999), and perceived control positively influenced employee coping during organizational change (Terry, 1994).

In summary, the literature reviewed here emphasizes the important role of individual characteristics in adaptation at work, which is consistent with Ashford and her colleagues (1990, 1996) who claim that individual and psychological factors are essential, and often underrepresented, components of effective adaptation at work. Our fundamental premise is that employability is a synergistic collection of individual characteristics that is energized and directed by an individual's career identity. Let us now consider the component dimensions of the psycho-social construct of employability.

### Dimensions of Employability

In addition to providing the conceptual foundation for the construct of employability, person-centered active adaptation also provides the conceptual glue that integrates the component dimensions of employability—career identity, personal adaptability, and social and human capital. We assert that in the context of careers and work, employability embodies a synergistic combination of career identity, personal adaptability, and social and human capital. More specifically, we argue that employability captures the aspects of each of the three dimensions that facilitate the identification and realization of career opportunities within and between organizations. Furthermore, we acknowledge that each of the dimensions of employability has value in its own right (i.e., independently), however, in concert they generate a concept we call employability. Thus, it is the synergistic combination of the dimensions that give rise and value to employability (see Figure 1).

Our conceptualization resembles that of Judge and his colleagues (Judge, Erez, Bono, & Thoresen, 2002) regarding core self-evaluations. They present core self-evaluations as a construct that encompasses the conceptual commonalities of four component dimensions. They note that psychologists have long debated the value of conceptualizing and measuring

psychological phenomena in terms of very narrow concepts, versus aggregates that represent the conceptual and empirical communalities of multiple narrower concepts. They argue that appropriate aggregates consolidate commonalities among concepts, and thus eliminate conceptual and operational redundancy (see also Tellegen, 1993). In other words, effective aggregates avoid slicing a conceptual domain into ever smaller elements; instead they represent a more parsimonious yet complete view of a given phenomenon. We assert that employability serves just this function, as it encompasses the conceptual commonalities of career identity, personal adaptability, and social and human capital that influence active adaptability at work.

To elaborate further, employability has broad implications for a host of occupations, industries, skill sets, labor markets, and so on. It is also important to note that the component dimensions may have differential influence or impact for a given individual, depending on the salient factors of a particular situation. However, employability represents the adaptive influence common to the component dimensions, the influence that the dimensions collectively bring to bear on a given individual and situation. Moreover, each dimension satisfies one or more of the adaptational requirements described by Ashford and Taylor (1990), and in concert, they provide the conceptual and predictive power of employability. In total, the three dimensions described below provide the cognitive impetus and individual characteristics that influence adaptive behaviors at work. The conceptual foundation of each dimension is discussed, at a molar level, and relations to employability are explicated.

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Insert Figure 1 about here  
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### Career Identity

A career identity provides a more or less coherent representation of often diverse and diffuse career experiences and aspirations. In the career context, “who I am” may include goals,

hopes, and fears; personality traits; values, beliefs, and norms; interaction styles; time horizons; and so on. Career identity resembles constructs like role identity, occupational identity, and organizational identity in that they all refer to how people define themselves in a particular work context. Career identity, however, is inherently *longitudinal* because it involves making sense of one's past and present and giving direction to one's future (although the relevance and importance of the past, present, and future tend to change over the life course) (Plunkett, 2001). As Meijers (1998: 200) notes, "The career identity is not the sum of [work] experiences but the assimilation of the experiences into meaningful or useful structures." Similarly, the cognitive-affective nature of career identity melds the other individual differences (e.g., dispositions, knowledge, skills, abilities) that comprise employability and facilitate the identification and realization of career opportunities.

As suggested by the concepts of boundaryless careers (Arthur & Rousseau, 1996) and protean workers (Mirvis & Hall, 1994), the variety of potential career trajectories is virtually unlimited. Moreover, the dynamism of the work world means that there are fewer career templates or role models that can be safely emulated (Meijers, 1998). Career identities help fill the void by replacing institutionalized career structures with individualized psychological structures. Career identities provide a compass for the individual, thereby offering a motivational component to employability.

As mentioned, the construct of career identity provides a strong cognitive and affective foundation for employability. By addressing "who I am or want to be" in the work domain, career identities delineate possibilities for the self at work—"possible selves" (Markus, 1983; Markus & Ruvolo, 1989)—providing personal goals or aspirations. Markus (1983) describes individuals' possible selves as the cognitive representations of the "(un)desired states for the self,

as well as specific ideas about how to realize [and sustain] or avoid these states” (p. 544). For instance, if a worker desires to be a successful manager (desired self) within a given high tech company, she may strive to acquire not only the technical knowledge required, but also a graduate degree in business administration. Both the technical and business components of the desired self presume the choice and pursuit of specific career related goals. The same reasoning applies to avoiding undesired career possible selves. Thus, career identities provide cognitive schemas that direct, regulate, and sustain behavior (cf. Locke, Shaw, Saari, & Latham, 1981) as individuals enact behaviors consistent with their desired self (Ashforth, 2001).

Career identities are often articulated in the form of narratives. Career identity narratives are stories people create to frame and give meaning and continuity to past, present, and future career related experiences (Ashforth & Fugate, 2001; Grotevant, 1997). Identity narratives are strongly shaped by one’s motives, particularly one’s possible selves and one’s desire to impress valued audiences, such as prospective employers. In so doing, identity narratives serve sensemaking and impression management functions (cf. Stokes, 1996). As motivated stories, the narratives tend to selectively highlight favored themes, downplay missteps and inconsistencies, lay the groundwork for future career moves, and perhaps even fictionalize (whether consciously or not). Moreover, given the complexity and turbulence of life, individuals tend to have multiple identity narratives, which provide added versatility for (re)constructing the past and present as a prologue for the future (Ashforth & Fugate, 2001). As such, identity narratives provide a foundation for an employee’s occupational value not only in her or his own eyes, but also in those of valued others, which is critically important to employability.

Career identity also is reflected in an individual’s identity style. Berzonsky’s (1990, 1992; Berzonsky & Adams, 1999) research on identity style suggests that people differ in their

receptiveness to the potential implications of their activities for the identities they hold. Individuals with an “information orientation” tend to proactively seek and use self-relevant information whereas individuals with a “normative orientation” tend to conform to others’ expectations and those with an “avoidant orientation” tend to avoid self-reflection. Thus, employees with an information oriented identity style are more likely to seek and internalize information that improves their station within the context of a particular job and their careers in general (Ashforth, 2001), and are likely better prepared to cope with a host of employment related stressors (cf. Aspinwall & Taylor, 1992, 1997). For example, in a study of female public assistance recipients, Cheek and Jones (2001) found that an information orientation was associated with less job turnover and time on public assistance than an avoidant orientation (however, the differences regarding information versus normative orientations were not significant). Therefore, an information-oriented identity style may enhance one’s ability to identify and realize career opportunities (i.e., employability).

### Personal Adaptability

Adaptable people are willing and able to change personal factors—KSAOs, dispositions, behaviors, and so on—to meet the demands of the situation (Ashford & Taylor, 1990; Chan, 2000). Personal adaptability contributes to both organizational performance (Crant, 2000) and career success (Pulakos et al., 2000) as it enables people to remain productive and attractive to employers in continually changing work domains (Chan, 2000). Researchers have also articulated the importance of adaptability for one’s overall career development (e.g., Savickas, 1997).

The ability to adapt to changing situations is primarily determined by individual differences (Chan, 2000) that predispose individuals to engage in (pro)actively adaptive efforts

(Crant, 2000; Seibert et al., 2001; Stokes, 1996). To be conceptually consistent with employability, individual differences that contribute to personal adaptability need to connote activity, paralleling the active orientation explained earlier. Furthermore, these individual differences need to have the dual qualities of being internally generated (i.e., dispositions) but externally focused, that is, elements of personal adaptability must have clear implications for adaptive behaviors in the work domain.

We reviewed the adaptability literature, searching for relevant person-centered variables. We did not intend to provide an exhaustive account; instead we looked for representative variables that met the following decision criteria. First, the variable needed general conceptual relevance to adaptability in the work domain. Second and more specifically, we required each variable to be consistent with the conceptual intent of employability. That is, the chosen variables needed to contribute to the identification and realization of opportunities at work; the external focus mentioned above. Ultimately, we chose five individual differences that met our requirements and appeared particularly germane to personal adaptability—optimism, propensity to learn, openness, internal locus of control, and generalized self-efficacy. We further argue that when manifested in individuals with high employability, these elements of personal adaptability are cognitively and affectively united and directed to yield a powerful influence on the identification and realization of opportunities at work.

Optimism in the work domain enables employees to “view change as a challenge—a learning experience that is intrinsically valuable” (Stokes, 1996: 76). Optimistic individuals have positive expectations about future events and show confidence in their ability to handle objective and affective challenges (cf. Judge et al., 1999; Peterson, 2000). Thus, optimistic workers are likely to perceive numerous opportunities in the workplace, to view career changes as challenges

(cf. Scheier & Carver, 1992), and to persist in the pursuit of desired outcomes and goals (Carver & Scheier, 1994), all of which clearly support an active and adaptive career orientation and foster employability.

The propensity to learn also is foundational to adaptability (cf. Ashford & Taylor, 1990; Hall, 1984; Hall & Mirvis, 1995; London & Smither, 1999). For instance, (pro)active efforts of employees with high employability are often attempts to learn more about the environment—threats and opportunities. In turn, the consequences associated with actions serve as feedback, which is key to deciphering which efforts are effectively adaptive (Ashford & Taylor, 1990). Employees with high employability scan the environment to learn what jobs are available and what experience and skills are required. They are then able to compare the market opportunities with their personal profile and interests. Moreover, continuous learning is widely acknowledged as a key determinant of career success (Hall, 1984; Hall & Mirvis, 1995; London & Smither, 1999). Given environmental flux, learning is central both to initiating beneficial change and to meeting ever-changing demands. Therefore, attitudes, motivations, and dispositions regarding learning are significant contributors to an individual's personal adaptability and employability.

Openness is fundamental to personal adaptability as well. Openness to change and new experiences supports continuous learning and enables one to identify and realize career opportunities. Open individuals tend to exhibit flexibility when confronted with the challenges inherent in uncertain situations (cf. Digman, 1990), such that openness fosters favorable individual attitudes toward change events at work (Miller, Johnson, & Gnau, 1994). For instance, Wanberg and Banas (2000) found that acceptance of change associated positively with job satisfaction and negatively with work irritation and intentions to quit. Openness to change associated positively with comfort in unfamiliar/uncertain situations, as well as increased

training proficiency across a variety of occupations (Barrick & Mount, 1991; Costa & McCrae, 1992). Open people also are likely to perceive change as a challenge rather than a threat and be receptive to new technologies and processes (e.g., McCartt & Rohrbaugh, 1995). Therefore, people that are open to new experiences and change are adaptable and, in the face of flux, ultimately more employable.

An internal locus of control is also central to personal adaptability. Individual control has been conceptualized and studied in numerous ways, and the distinction between internal and external locus of control is especially prominent (Skinner, 1996). Individuals with an internal locus believe that they can generally influence events around them, whereas externals believe that events are generally beyond their personal control (Rotter, 1966; Spector, 1988). Thus, internals are more adaptable (cf. Wanberg & Banas, 2000) and make smoother work-role transitions than their external counterparts. Internals also are more likely to engage in proactive efforts (e.g., planning) during work transitions (Breese & O'Toole, 1995; Carter & Cook, 1995; Stolz-Loike, 1996) and to assert effort to improve their situation in life (Gould, 1979). Therefore, individuals with an internal locus of control at work are more adaptable and employable, relative to externals, because they tend to be proactive and plan in situations of uncertainty.

Next, generalized self-efficacy (GSE) supports personal adaptability. Ashford and Taylor (1990) suggest that self-efficacy is an important “internal condition” required for effective adaptation. Generalized self-efficacy “represents an individual’s perception of their ability to perform across a variety of situations...[and] encompasses individuals’ judgments of their capabilities to handle events in their lives and deal successfully with life’s challenges” (Judge, Erez, & Bono, 1998: 170). As such, GSE exerts a positive influence on one’s perceptions of adaptive capacity and influences their determination in the face of uncertainty. For instance, GSE

predicted attempted role innovation 10 months after job entry for university graduates (Ashforth & Saks, 2000), and was positively related to goal setting and goal commitment for insurance sales agents (Erez & Judge, 2001). Meta-analytic results showed positive relations between GSE and two important work outcome variable—job satisfaction and job performance (Judge & Bono, 2001). Moreover, because GSE influences perceptions and behaviors across situations, it promotes personal adaptability regardless of the type of job one pursues (entry level or executive level) or the type of transition made (promotion or reemployment). Therefore, GSE is important to personal adaptability and facilitates the identification and realization of career opportunities.

### Social and Human Capital

The third dimension of employability is social and human capital. Individuals and organizations make investments in social and human capital in anticipation of future returns in the workplace (cf. Dess & Shaw, 2001; Jackson & Schuler, 1995). More specifically, one's ability to identify and realize career opportunities (i.e., employability) is greatly influenced by such capital. These factors are often included in broader conceptualizations of KSAOs; however, discussion here is limited to only social and human capital due to their particular relevance to employability. Moreover, both social and human capital are incorporated into individual's career identities, further embedding them in the construct of employability.

Social capital is the goodwill inherent in social networks. Social capital contributes an overtly social and interpersonal element to employability, and it confers information and influence to the “holder” via the networks (Adler & Kwon, 2002). In the context of work, information and influence provide individuals with access to career opportunities (Burt, 1997a, 1997b; Portes, 1998) and are critical elements for achieving occupational aspirations. Accordingly, network size (Seibert et al., 2001) and network strength (Higgins & Kram, 2001)

are two important network characteristics that determine the potential of the information and influence provided. The sheer size and diversity of an individual's network is presumably proportionate to the amount of information and influence contained within the network, as well as the utility of that information and influence (Higgins & Kram, 2001; Seibert et al., 2001). Moreover, the strength of the relationship bonds within the network confer solidarity (Adler & Kwon, 2002) and reciprocity (Higgins & Kram, 2001), which are powerful predictors of the amount of influence exerted on one's behalf.

The benefits of social capital and its influence on employability are illustrated in the job search behaviors of individuals. People with well developed social capital often utilize informal job search networks (e.g., "friend of a friend"), in addition to more formal networks (e.g., company sponsored placement services). In fact, Boxman, de Graaf, and Flap (1991) found that top managers more often found jobs through informal networks and that social capital had a positive and independent effect on salary above and beyond human capital. Social capital has additional importance because the inherent relationships can span organizations and time. Therefore, social networks extend an individual's ability to identify and realize opportunities between organizations, across industries, and over entire careers (Dess & Shaw, 2001; Higgins & Kram, 2001). This is especially true if a member of the social network has hiring authority.

Similarly, an employee's ability to realize opportunities in the marketplace is greatly influenced by his or her human capital. Human capital refers to a host of factors that influence a person's career advancement variables—age and education (Wanberg, Watt, & Rumsey, 1996), work experience and training (Becker, 1975), job performance and organization tenure (Forbes & Piercy, 1991), emotional intelligence (Wong & Law, 2002), cognitive ability (Tharenou, 1997)—and the KSAOs these have conferred (Becker, 1975; Malos & Campion, 1995). Of the

many human capital factors, education and experience have been found to be the strongest predictors of career progression (Judge, Cable, Boudreau, & Bretz, 1995; Kirchmeyer, 1998; Tharenou, Latimer, & Conroy, 1994). Some level of education is preferred if not required for most forms of employment—whether a level of compulsory education, an associate’s degree, a four-year degree, a certification for a particular line of work, or a professional degree. In fact, some researchers propose that the value or rate of return for education is measurable (see Coleman, 1988).

Experience also is important. Experience usually affords an individual varying levels of proficiency and tacit knowledge (Lubit, 2001), which makes one more attractive to prospective employers. In today’s work environment, experience is often denoted by “portable skills” (Anderson, 2001) rather than by industry or occupation specific exposure. Portable skills consist of KSAOs acquired and demonstrated in often very different contexts that are transferable to other contexts. Consequently, employers often select and advance individuals partly on their experience (cf. Tharenou, 1997), and experience is linked to productivity and rewards (e.g., status and compensation) (Becker, 1975; Forbes & Piercy, 1991; Tharenou, 1997). In short, human capital represents an individual’s ability to meet the performance expectations of a given occupation (Burt, 1997a; Portes, 1998). Conceptualized in this way, human capital contributes to both individual and organizational adaptability (see also the mutual malleability discussion above). Moreover, investment in human capital over one’s career signifies an adaptive orientation and a commitment to continuous learning (cf. Becker, 1975; London & Smither, 1999), which further bolster employability.

#### Relationships Between Employability and its Dimensions

With the theoretical grounding of employability established, we now discuss two critical

sets of relations: those between employability and its component dimensions and those among the underlying dimensions themselves. We assert that employability is a multi-dimensional construct whose component dimensions are reciprocally related. Furthermore, we suggest that the dimensions of employability collectively provide for the three conditions necessary for effective adaptation—adequate information, appropriate internal conditions, and freedom of movement—described by Ashford and Taylor (1990).

### Employability as a Multidimensional Construct

Law, Wong, and Mobley (1998) discuss the conceptual basis of multidimensional constructs (MDCs) in terms of: 1) the form of the MDC, that is, the directionality of the relations between the construct and its dimensions (reflective versus causal), and 2) the level of conceptual abstraction between the construct and its component dimensions. Law et al. claim it is essential to articulate the conceptual basis of an MDC like employability before using the construct to test substantive relations. For our purposes, employability is a multidimensional construct of career-specific proactive adaptability, comprised of three latent, person-centered dimensions. Each dimension is specific to the domain of work, which further contextualizes the construct.

Two multidimensional forms discussed by Law et al. (1998) are relevant to the discussion of employability; latent and aggregate MDCs. Latent MDCs are those whose phenomena are *reflected* or manifested in their multiple dimensions (see Figure 2a). In other words, the dimensions are effects of the MDC (Bollen & Ting, 2000). Latent MDCs reside at a different (higher) level of conceptual abstraction than their component dimensions. Law et al. use general mental ability (GMA) as an example. GMA is reflected in an individual's verbal, quantitative, and reasoning skills. Each of the skills is representative of one's GMA, but smaller in scope than

GMA. Thus, a more complete view of GMA is found by examining how it is reflected in its three component dimensions. Accordingly, GMA is at a higher level of abstraction than its component dimensions. In contrast, aggregate MDCs are *caused* by their component dimensions and are similar in terms of conceptual level (see Figure 2b). As such, aggregate MDCs are caused by or have meaning because of their dimensions (cf. Bollen & Ting, 2000). Law et al. use overall job satisfaction as an example. According to Lawler (1983), overall job satisfaction is caused by or is a function of an individual's satisfaction with five job facets: pay, coworkers, working conditions, supervision, and promotion opportunities. Considering the converse further clarifies the point: it does not make sense to suggest that overall job satisfaction causes satisfaction with promotional opportunities (beyond a general halo). Therefore, overall job satisfaction cannot be observed directly, rather, it is a composite given meaning by its component facets. In both the latent and aggregate cases, the underlying multidimensional construct is not measured directly and represents the conceptual (and empirical) variance common to the underlying dimensions (cf. Judge et al., 2002).

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We propose that employability is an aggregate MDC, such that one's career identity, personal adaptability, and social and human capital cause or create one's employability. Thus, the directionality of the relations is causal (Figure 2b) rather than reflective (Figure 2a). Employability has meaning only when the component dimensions are considered collectively. In other words, one's perceived ability to identify and realize career opportunities is derived from their career identity, personal adaptability, and social and human capital. It makes more sense to say that social and human capital cause employability than the converse—that social and human

capital are caused by the higher-level construct of employability. Thus, the multidimensional nature of employability is hypothesized to represent the directional and conceptual characteristics of an aggregate MDC.

### Reciprocal Determinism and Dimensions of Employability

The relations between the component dimensions of employability are grounded in reciprocal determinism, which holds that personal, behavioral, and environmental factors interactively influence each other (e.g., Bandura, 1977, 1978; Davis & Luthans, 1980). Accordingly, career identity, personal adaptability, and social and human capital exert a mutual influence on each other. None of these factors operate independently; to understand the implications of any given factor and of employability as a gestalt, one must examine the entire constellation of factors (cf. Bandura, 1977).

To this end, Chan (2000) offered further support for the interdependent/reciprocal nature of adaptation at work. He suggested that the integration of individual difference and learning perspectives offers a more informed view of adaptation. On the one hand, the individual difference perspective highlights the importance of inherent individual characteristics that predispose employees to adaptability: this describes “who” is capable of adapting. On the other hand, the learning perspective illuminates the actions or behaviors that employees enact to become adaptive—in other words, “how” employees become adaptive. Each perspective connotes an active role for the employee (cf. Frese & Fay, 2001). Conceptualized in this way, the individual difference and learning perspectives are complementary and illustrate the interactive (i.e., reciprocal deterministic) and proactive nature of employability. Let us now consider the interrelationships among employability’s component dimensions.

Career identity and personal adaptability. The relationship between career identity and

personal adaptability is increasingly important for three reasons (Ashforth, 2001; Hall, 2002; Hall & Mirvis, 1995). First, given the variety of potential career choices, one's career identity strongly channels the adaptive challenges one must face. Second, given environmental flux, a career identity is forever a work-in-progress, a periodically updated (and often revised) history and forecast of the self at work. Personal adaptability enables the individual to remain somewhat opportunistic within the broad contours of one's career identity.

Third, we speculate that because of environmental turbulence, people are increasingly *defining* themselves as adaptable—as Hall's (1986, 1996, 2002; Hall & Mirvis, 1995) protean worker. This definition becomes self-fulfilling as they enact behaviors that express this identity (Ashforth, 2001). For instance, an individual may see herself as a high achiever, one that does whatever is required to meet an employer's strategic changes. This element of her career identity may manifest as a willingness to tackle novel and challenging projects and undertake the necessary learning. In turn, this heightened personal adaptability enhances the chances of success, thus reinforcing identity.

In summary, if career identity furnishes the “who I am” (or want to be), personal adaptability can provide the “how” that facilitates its realization. This process results in a reciprocal relationship between career identity and personal adaptability.

Career identity and social and human capital. Human capital and the relationships that constitute social capital are often important elements of an individual's self-definition. Past career experiences are vital in building human and social capital. Jobs impart KSAOs and provide contacts and a reputation that can be parlayed into additional capital and integrated into one's career identity (cf. Ashforth, 2001). For instance, human capital was the major contributor to women's advancement in the banking industry (Metz & Tharenou, 2001), and Zippay (2001)

found that social networks (i.e., social capital) contributed more to quality reemployment for displaced steelworkers than did job-specific training. The resulting experiences and contacts also are used to identify and realize future career opportunities, which may reflect the aspirations contained in one's career identity.

Accordingly, individuals that define themselves as knowledgeable and having a good reputation are likely to pursue jobs, education, and contacts that provide the necessary experiences to express and enhance these elements of their identity (cf. Ashforth, 2001). In sum, social and human capital are critical to defining "who I am" in the work setting, and the career identity helps drive additional investments in social and human capital, thereby fueling the hypothesized reciprocal relationships.

Personal adaptability and social and human capital. People who possess adaptable attributes are expected to interact with uncertain environments more effectively than those who are more rigid (e.g., Ashford & Taylor, 1990; Chan, 2000). For example, adaptable individuals are more adept at cultivating relationships foundational to social capital (Seibert et al., 2001). Their proclivity for learning facilitates both the creation and maintenance of social networks that are central to the identification and realization of career opportunities (e.g., Zippay, 2001). Additionally, adaptable individuals pursue training and other opportunities to build their KSAOs, which are fundamental investments in human capital (Becker, 1975). Moreover, realizing a greater number and higher quality of occupational opportunities likely increases human capital. Thus, it is reasonable to assume that in a dynamic work domain, adaptable individuals develop both social and human capital more extensively and effectively than those that are less adaptable.

In turn, social and human capital have important implications for personal adaptability. The information acquired via social capital serves as intelligence for adapting, while the

influence facilitated by this information assists in the realization of adaptability (e.g., increased opportunities). Moreover, the information and job opportunities provided through social capital support continuous learning. This discussion suggests a reciprocal relationship between personal adaptability and social and human capital.

### Comparing and Contrasting Employability and Other Proactive Constructs

To clarify the nomological network of the employability construct, we compare and contrast employability to other person-centered constructs that have implications for (pro)active adaptability at work—proactive behavior (for a review see Crant, 2000), personal initiative (e.g., Frese & Fay, 2001), proactive personality (Seibert et al., 2001), and career motivation (London, 1983, 1993). That said, we contend that employability is a more variegated construct that subsumes each of these variables. Employability borrows insights from and extends these constructs. This section briefly defines and reviews these constructs, describing commonalities and highlighting differences.

Crant defines proactive behavior as “taking initiative in improving current circumstances or creating new ones; it involves challenging the status quo rather than passively adapting to current circumstances” (2000: 436). Applied to the work domain, proactive individuals behave in ways that influence numerous important outcomes: job performance (e.g., Crant, 1995), career success (e.g., Seibert et al., 1999), and job attitudes (Bateman & Crant, 1993). Similarly, Frese and Fay (2001) explicated the construct of personal initiative, a personal disposition comprised of a collection of behaviors (e.g., self-starting, proactivity, persisting) that workers enact in order to achieve work goals. This is related to the construct of proactive personality, which describes people who assert themselves to influence the environment in favorable ways and are undaunted by situational impediments (Bateman & Crant, 1993). Employees with proactive personalities

tend to demonstrate proactive behaviors, such as innovation, political knowledge, and career initiative, which have been shown to enhance career success—salary progression, promotions, and career satisfaction (Seibert et al., 2001). Lastly, London (1983, 1993) presented career motivation as a “construct internal to the individual, influenced by the situation, and reflected in the individual’s decisions and behaviors” (1983: 620). The construct relies heavily on motivational needs and goals and focuses on the attitude-behavior relationship. Career motivation is based on Dawis and Lofquist’s (1984) theory of work adjustment; accordingly, the construct is framed in terms of congruence or fit between individual attributes and situational requirements. As such, career motivation describes employees as reactive to situational demands (for a review see London & Noe, 1997). Noe, Noe, and Bachhuber (1990) operationalized career motivation with an emphasis on personal career goals, and they showed that career motivation related positively to job characteristics and individual and organizational career plans and goals.

These constructs share at least four similarities with employability. First, like employability, these constructs are conceptualized (and operationalized) in terms of individual differences (for a review see Crant, 2000). Second, it is logical to assume that all of these constructs have implications for behavior across a wide variety of work situations. Proactive behavior (Crant, 2000) and personal initiative (Frese & Fay, 2001) are explicitly behavioral, while proactive personality and career motivation drive behavior. Further, the majority of previous research tested relations to career outcomes: promotions, salary progression, career satisfaction, and job performance (e.g., Crant, 1995; Siebert et al., 2001). (Clearly, all of the constructs mentioned need to be tested in relation to other outcomes, such as voluntary turnover and coping with organizational change.) Third, the literature related to each construct at least suggests implications for proactive adaptability (however, only employability explicitly

integrates proactivity and adaptability). Lastly, each construct is grounded in an action orientation, except career motivation, which is articulated as a predictor of employees' reactive responses to situational demands (e.g., London, 1983; London & Noe, 1997; Noe et al., 1990).

In contrast, employability differs from these constructs in at least three important ways. First, it encompasses a wider array of individual characteristics. Employability includes cognitive (e.g., career identity), dispositional (e.g., propensity to learn), and market-interactive variables (e.g., social and human capital). Further, employability actually subsumes each of the other constructs. For example, proactive personality and personal initiative are subsumed in personal adaptability; the career identity element of career motivation is included in employability; and the career resilience element of career motivation is reflected in the employability dimension of personal adaptability.

Second, employability is explicitly contextualized in work settings. This difference is critically important because it makes employability a more powerful predictor of many human resource oriented outcomes (e.g., selection, promotion, and turnover). Of the other constructs reviewed, only career motivation is directly conceptualized as a work domain construct. The others are more molar/general dispositions that researchers simply tested in the work context. Last, employability integrates the dispositional and situational elements of proactivity, which Crant (2000) described as a clear divide or point of contention in the literature. By including social and human capital, employability provides a market-interfacing dimension not found in these other constructs. Social capital enables individuals to engage the market for personal gain, while human capital provides currency by which employers can evaluate candidates. In sum, employability provides a more complete and precise description of proactive adaptability at work.

## Employability Implications for Employees in Transition: Job Loss and Job Search

In this section the implications of employability are explored for employees coping with job loss and those searching for jobs. The intent is to briefly illustrate how employability and its dimensions can be applied to important organizational behavior topics. Each topic is particularly pertinent to the tumultuous work environment that is ever more common to employee experience.

### The Impact of Employability on the Process of Coping with Job Loss

Despite the incredible economic expansion in the United States during the 1990's, the accompanying environmental turbulence displaced millions of workers, which has greatly intensified since the 2000 economic downturn. As a result, considerable research has addressed how people cope with involuntary job loss (e.g., Leana & Feldman, 1992; McKee-Ryan & Kinicki, 2002). To address this phenomenon, Latack, Kinicki, and Prussia (1995) proposed a cybernetic model that describes several facets or dimensions of life that are salient to displaced workers (i.e., economic, physiological, psychological, and social). When a worker is displaced, he or she appraises the meaning of the event in terms of these facets. Comparisons are made between goals and feedback related to a given facet, then any apparent discrepancies prompt the formulation of specific coping goals and strategies. Lastly, Latack and her colleagues posit that coping efficacy and coping resources facilitate the coping process.

Employability can add to the predictability of Latack et al.'s model, which was partially tested and supported by Kinicki et al. (2000). (While employability could affect numerous elements of Latack et al.'s model, we discuss only a sample here for illustration.) First and most generally, employability influences discrepancy appraisal. Because displaced workers with high employability are more likely to identify and realize opportunities in the marketplace, the

construct may help explain how some people perceive job loss as an opportunity for growth and needed change (i.e., a challenge or gain) (cf. Tomaka, Blascovich, Kibler, & Ernst, 1997). Thus, individuals with high employability are predicted to appraise job loss as less harmful or threatening (i.e., perceive less loss).

Latack et al. (1995) also posit an important role for coping resources. Coping resources influence discrepancy appraisal, coping goals, and coping strategies. We propose a homologous role for employability. Coping resources are internal and external factors that individuals utilize to deal with facet discrepancies. We contend that employability provides a rich source of coping resources. As previously described, employability includes variables such as openness to change (Watson & Hubbard, 1996) and optimism (Wanberg & Banas, 2000). Additionally, the social capital dimension provides an important external resource. Further, employability is context specific. Typically, coping resources are global in nature, especially internal resources (e.g., life satisfaction, general self-esteem), and are exclusively internal or external. Employability is keenly focused on work-relevant resources and encompasses both internal and external elements. As a result, employability is a valuable coping resource in the work context.

Finally, employability is predicted to enhance displaced worker's coping efficacy and to directly affect an individual's coping goal. According to Latack and her colleagues (1995), coping efficacy is the belief that one has the resources and ability to manage the demands associated with job loss. Job losers with high employability are thus hypothesized to have stronger perceptions of coping efficacy because they are more skilled and confident at interfacing with the market and are more adaptable, which affords them more opportunities and a greater ability to realize them. Moreover, employability is predicted to foster more proactive coping goals and associated coping strategies. In support, Prussia, Fugate, and Kinicki (2001)

found that human capital (i.e., age and education) and coping resources (i.e., self-esteem and life satisfaction) predicted displaced workers' reemployment coping goal intensity. Furthermore, we expect coping goals to be highly influenced by one's career identities. That is, displaced workers are likely to choose goals that are consistent with their desired selves (salient career identities).

### The Impact of Employability on the Job Search Process

Job search has become an ever-more important and common experience for workers due to the dynamism in the workplace and the frequency of job loss described above. The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (2000) stated that American workers now often make a dozen or more transitions during their working lives. In response, researchers have identified and investigated numerous individual difference factors that influence both job search behaviors and employment outcomes (for a meta-analysis and synthesis see Kanfer, Wanberg, & Kantrowitz, 2001). Kanfer and her colleagues describe job search for displaced workers as “a purposive, volitional pattern of action that begins with the identification and commitment to pursuing an employment goal. The employment goal, in turn, activates search behavior designed to bring about the goal” (p. 838). They identified six categories of antecedents of job search behaviors and employment outcomes: personality traits (five factor model), generalized expectancies (locus of control and optimism), self-evaluations (self-esteem and job search self-efficacy), motives, social context, and biographical variables (age, gender, education, race, and work-job tenure). They proposed that these non-ability individual differences affect self-regulatory processes that influence both job search behaviors and ultimate job search outcomes.

Not only does employability subsume many of the individual differences studied by Kanfer and her associates, but we also contend that it affects the self-regulatory job search process and associated outcomes. Employability has unique influences on job search behaviors,

job choice, and job search outcomes. For example, individuals with high employability are likely to utilize their social capital to proactively identify reemployment goals (opportunities) when job loss is anticipated or advanced notice is provided. Moreover, opportunities identified via social capital are directed and driven by the career identity dimension of employability. Employability also connotes confidence with and the active use of multiple search modalities, due to generalized self-efficacy and an active orientation. These factors facilitate the utilization of both social capital and job-search resources, which enhance ultimate reemployment outcomes. We further assert that employability is likely to improve the ultimate quality of reemployment (cf. McKee-Ryan & Kinicki, 2002), which was not directly addressed by Kanfer et al. The employment goals of those with high employability are likely to be consistent with career identities, resulting in more satisfactory (i.e., quality) employment outcomes.

### Conclusion

This article introduced the employability construct, defining it as a multidimensional aggregate of career identity, personal adaptability, and social and human capital. We asserted that employability captures the conceptual commonalities among these dimensions, as they relate to active adaptability at work. We also elaborated the conceptual foundations of the construct. Employability was proposed as a form of work specific proactive adaptability that builds on and extends research pertaining to adaptive, proactive, and active individual dispositions and behaviors. Moreover, we explicated that employability includes a strong and important cognitive-affective element (career identity) that both directs and energizes one's active and adaptive efforts.

We illustrated that employability is beneficial to employees in transition—coping with job loss and job search. For such employees, employability facilitates the identification and

realization of occupational opportunities. We substantiated this supposition by reviewing research which shows that proactive behaviors tend to be stress abating in the job loss context (McKee-Ryan & Kinicki, 2002), generally adaptable in terms of coping (Aspinwall & Taylor, 1997), and produce desirable behaviors and outcomes during job search (Kanfer et al., 2001).

Future research clearly is needed to operationally define the construct of employability and to test our theoretical propositions. Operationalizations of employability need to determine what constitutes high versus low employability. Researchers might also explore the role employability plays in various work-related phenomena. For instance, employability is expected to influence involuntary and voluntary turnover. Employers espouse the benefits of proactive and adaptable workers (Frese & Fay, 2001). Moreover, individual social capital is now recognized as an important organization-level resource (Anand, Glick, & Manz, 2002; Dess & Shaw, 2001). Therefore, future research is needed to investigate whether employability captures these elements and influences subsequent termination decisions, that is, whether individuals with high employability are more likely to be retained. Employability also has clear implications for voluntary turnover. Employability facilitates mobility and thus undoubtedly contributes to an individual's "movement capital" (cf. Trevor, 2001). Future research can determine whether employability is a differential predictor of voluntary exit within a given organization or industry, regardless of economic or labor market conditions. Additionally, we believe that future research will elaborate the meaning of the employability construct by relaxing the boundary conditions and exploring transitions other than those between jobs. For example, it is likely that employability will positively influence important workplace phenomena, such as coping with organizational change, performance, and proactive socialization. We also expect employability to affect the trajectory of one's career path. Future efforts such as these will illuminate the

potential of this important psycho-social construct.

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Figure 1: Heuristic model of employability

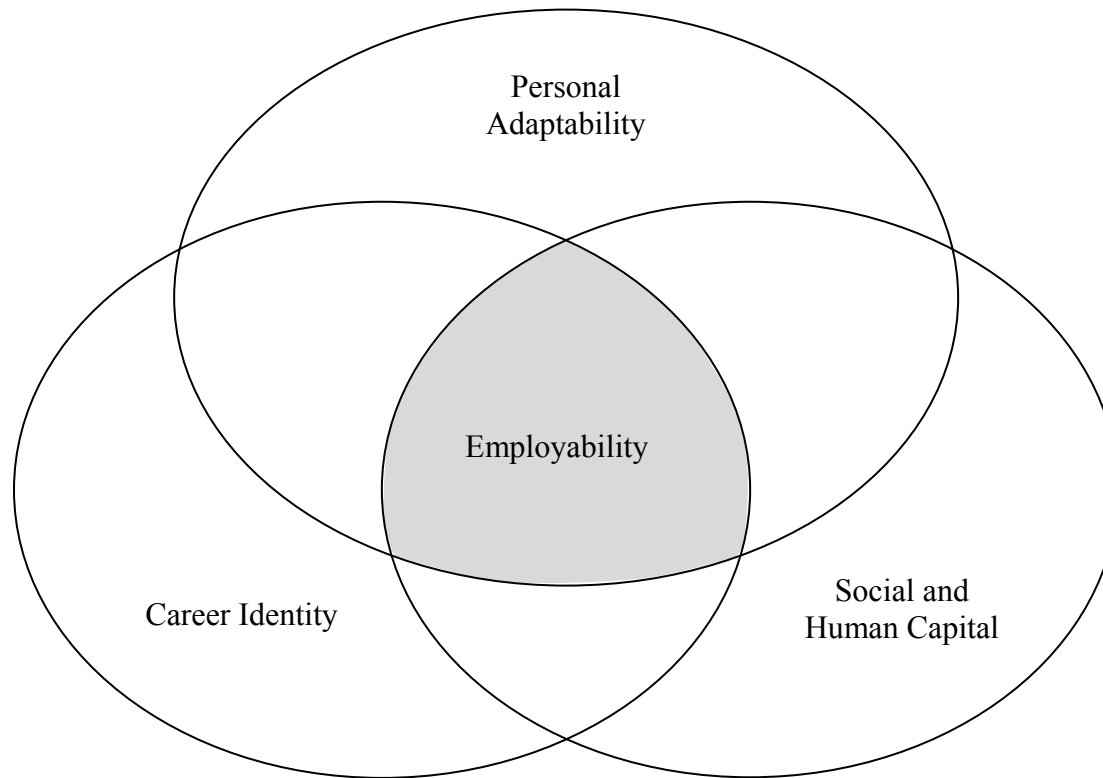


Figure 2: Employability as a latent multidimensional construct (Panel A) and as an aggregate multidimensional construct (Panel B)

