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Can employability do the trick?

Revealing paradoxical tensions and responses in the process of adopting innovative employability enhancing policies and practices in organizations**

This study uses a ‘paradox lens’ to contribute to employability debates in HRM by examining the effectiveness of employability enhancing policies and practices (hereafter EP&Ps) in three case organizations. We identify three organizing paradoxes reflecting the complexities of the Dutch economic, political and socio-cultural contexts. In line with the EP&Ps’ competing goals, we label these: the ‘(inverted) flexibility/commitment paradox’; ‘self-management/(human-resource) management paradox’; and the ‘sustainability/effectiveness and efficiency paradox’. We further analyse how their underlying paradoxical tensions spill over and create role-performance, belonging and learning paradoxical tensions at the micro-level and how these cumulatively impact managers’ and employees’ responses to EP&Ps. We then explore how HRM tries to actively go beyond ‘reinforcing paradox cycles’ by creating awareness and stimulating contextual change to foster the wider adoption of EP&Ps. In conclusion, we argue that the paradox lens can inform HRM scholars and labour market stakeholders to search for innovative ways to study and govern contemporary employability issues.

Key words: employability, employment relationship, HRM, paradox, policy adoption, psychological contract, social security
(JEL: M10, M12, M14, M55, M53, M54, J20, J50, J62, I24)

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Introduction

Employability can be referred to as individuals' capabilities to maintain, nurture and develop competencies and qualifications which can enhance their sustainable labour market participation, or in other words, their career potential (Van der Heijde & Van der Heijden, 2006). In contemporary labour market restructuring debates, 'lifetime employability' rather than 'lifetime employment' is presented as *the 'new labour market protection'* (cf., Pruijt & Dérogée, 2010). Employability is often viewed as a 'win-win' for all labour market parties. It is argued that it makes workers better equipped to take on other types of jobs inside or outside their current employment if necessary, meanwhile enabling organizations to meet fluctuating and unpredictable market demands (Nauta, Van Vianen, Van der Heijden, Van Dam, & Willemsen, 2009).

In view of emerging flexible labour markets, employability also has become the key feature of *the 'new psychological contract'* (Hiltrop, 1995). This means that the responsibility for career development and labour market mobility is increasingly shifted from the organization to the individual (Forrier & Sels, 2003). In exchange for individuals' self-managed lifetime employability, HRM is supposed to develop employability policies which provide workers with access to associated employability enhancing practices. These employability enhancing policies and practices (hereafter EP&Ps) may include offering formal training or job rotation programs (cf., Fleishmann, Koster, & Schippers, 2015) and testing and counselling opportunities to make workers aware of their "skills, interests, values and temperaments" (Waterman, Waterman, & Collard, 1994, p. 89). Some organizations have introduced 'employability voucher schemes' to increase employability awareness, orientation and willingness to train (Gerards, De Grip, & Witlox, 2014). Having EP&Ps in place can also be viewed as an organizational strategy to enhance social legitimacy (Hallier & Butts, 1996), as it can benefit the whole economy by reducing social security costs resulting from lower unemployment rates and increased well-being.

Employability studies indeed show that the use of EP&Ps has the potential to enhance workers' employability (e.g., Gerards et al., 2014; Groot & Maassen van den Brink, 2000; Sanders & De Grip, 2004), and hence their career success (Fugate, Kinicki, & Ashforth, 2004; Van der Heijde & Van der Heijden, 2006). However, despite the growing attention for and organizations' adoption of EP&Ps (Clarke & Patrickson, 2008; Fleishmann et al., 2015), HRM scholars perceive a lack of interest in and use of EP&Ps by employees (cf., Gerards et al., 2014). Moreover, internal and external mobility remains low (Van Vianen, 2006). In view of this, our multiple case study aims to enhance the scholarly and societal employability debates in the HRM literature by evaluating and critically examining the effectiveness of EP&Ps in three organizations in the Netherlands.

In the following theoretical section, we will present our 'paradox lens' based on key writings in organization studies (Jarzabkowski, Lê, & Van de Ven, 2013; Lewis, 2000; Smith & Lewis, 2011). This lens allows us to critically examine how EP&Ps in our case organizations are adopted (i.e., perceived, intended, implemented, and used) by three intra-organizational stakeholder groups: HRM professionals, line management and employees. Similar to other HRM studies on paradoxes in organizations (cf., Ehnert, 2009,

2014; Putnam, Myers, & Gailliard, 2014), we follow Smith and Lewis (2011) by defining “paradox as contradictory yet interrelated elements that exist simultaneously and persist over time” (p. 382). We argue that the more critical stance of the paradox lens allows us to better grasp the complexities surrounding the employability issue compared to mainstream psychological and HRM perspectives often used in the employability and HRM debates. In the methodology section, we present our research strategy and ‘multi-level’, ‘multi-stakeholder’, and ‘multi case-study’ design. In the results section, we present our findings. We identify and label three so-called ‘organizing paradoxes’ and their associated ‘learning paradoxes’ (Jarzabkowski et al., 2013; Lewis, 2000; Smith & Lewis, 2011). We indicate how their underlying tensions cumulatively spill over to the micro-level creating so-called ‘role-performance’, ‘belonging’ and ‘learning paradoxical tensions’ (ibid.), felt and responded to, by line managers and employees. We also show how responses to paradox at the micro-level impede the effectiveness of the case organizations’ EP&Ps, potentially leading to inequalities in workers’ access to employability enhancing practices. Moreover, we give insight into how HRM professionals, in response, try to actively manage these paradoxical tensions in order to improve their EP&Ps’ effectiveness (ibid.). In the concluding section, we summarise and discuss our main findings and argue that our paradox lens can fruitfully contribute to HRM scholars and labour market stakeholders finding innovative ways to study and govern contemporary employability issues in order to enhance both the effectiveness and fairness of EP&Ps.

Theoretical framework

The merits of a process approach to paradox as a lens to study EP&Ps’ effectiveness

Many studies on employability as an HRM issue are informed by psychological lenses. A well-known approach to employability is the ‘competence-based approach’ (cf., Fugate et al. 2004; Van der Heijde & Van der Heijden, 2006) which is used to prove the added value of workers’ investment in their human, social and psychological capital for their career success (ibid.). The five-dimensional conceptualisation of employability by Van der Heijde and Van der Heijden (2006) illustrates that the concept is inherently paradoxical in nature. Maintaining and enhancing employability implies simultaneous, persistent and often conflicting investment in workers’ (1) *domain-specific occupational expertise* and more general competences in order to enhance their (2) *proactive* and (3) *reactive adaptability* to labour market and organizational changes, meanwhile maintaining their (4) *occupational sense* (commitment to organizational and team goals) and (5) *balance* between organizational and personal interests (including health, vitality, and work-life balance) (ibid.).

In their attempt to explain workers’ motivations for adopting organizations’ EP&Ps, many psychologically-oriented employability studies focus on the influence of micro-level factors, such as workers’ age, gender, career ambition, employability awareness and orientation, and their perceptions of their organizations’ employability climate (e.g., De Cuyper & De Witte, 2011; Gerards et al., 2014; Nauta et al., 2009; Van Dam, 2004; Van der Heijde & Van der Heijden, 2006). Moreover, these studies often employ a quantitative research design, including a preselected and limited set of variables in their models. Although the psychological lens is shown to be fruitful in order to answer many

problem definitions at the micro-level, due to their intention to be parsimonious and internally consistent, the wider organizational context influencing and explaining how EP&Ps are perceived, attitudes shaped, and behaviours enacted is sometimes recognised, but often ignored and eliminated (cf., Janssens & Steyaert, 2009; Poole & Van de Ven, 1989). In practice, the employability issue is strongly embedded in political debates, and affected by global economic structures. Therefore, with their partial view on micro-level factors, psychologically-oriented employability studies may be too limited in scope to fully grasp the employability phenomenon's complex and multifaceted reality (ibid.), in particular its relationship with macro-level developments which this study aims to look into. Moreover, although contemporary discussions on employability have paid attention to ambiguities, paradoxes, and tensions (cf., De Cuyper & De Witte, 2011; Van der Heijde & Van der Heijden, 2006), the multiple employability dimensions are often analysed separately (ibid.), without systematically looking into their interrelationships. Since employability is an inherently paradoxical and 'ambidextrous problem' (cf., Tushman & O'Reilly, 1996), in order to understand EP&P's effectiveness, we link the multi-dimensional conceptualisation of employability (Van der Heijde & Van der Heijden, 2006) to the complex relationships between organizations' external (market and institutional) and internal contexts, impacting intra-organizational stakeholders' responses to EP&Ps (i.e., perceptions, attitudes, and behaviours). Using a paradox lens helps to focus on paradoxical tensions which may originate in, and operate at and across multiple organizational levels (Jarzabkowski et al., 2013; Smith & Lewis, 2011) and which can be associated with stakeholders' multiple, often conflicting goals associated with employability.

Besides psychologically-oriented studies, mainstream HRM contingency approaches also aim to explain and evaluate the adoption of HRM policies and practices. Their focus is on the contextual fit or alignment of HRM policies and practices. However, although they acknowledge that coexisting fits and misfits may ultimately lead to tensions at the organizational, managerial, or employee levels (Paauwe, Boon, Boselie, & Den Hartog, 2012), they assume management to be able to design and implement Strategic HRM (SHRM) practices that can simultaneously produce multiple gains for all parties (Janssens & Steyaert, 2009, p. 145), without acknowledging that intra-organizational stakeholders' goals are often inherently conflicting. The merit of a paradox lens is that it accepts and explicates that tensions associated with paradox can only be harnessed, rather than resolved (Smith & Lewis, 2011, p. 395). Hence, using a paradox lens allows us to focus on how organizations and their stakeholders perceive and engage in the process of equilibrating and managing so called 'ambidextrous', or 'paradoxical strategic challenges' in light of dynamic market and institutional developments to simultaneously encourage 'paradoxical poles' (Lewis, 2000), for example those associated with legitimation, fairness, flexibility, commitment, autonomy, control, sustainability, effectiveness and efficiency.

In addition, contemporary SHRM debates increasingly view the adoption of HRM policies and practices as a causal chain-process, which consists of interrelated phases. This approach stresses the importance of multiple stakeholders' views on, perceptions and evaluations of, and cognitive, emotional and behavioural responses to HRM's pol-

icies and practices. These process models distinguish between intended, actual (implemented), and used policies and practices, referring to the various analytical levels (Wright & Nishii, 2007). HRM may be taken to represent the meso-level and line managers and individual workers the micro-level. By including the interrelationships between multiple levels and multiple stakeholders, this HRM-process lens provides a more comprehensive and dynamic picture in order to understand the adoption process of EP&Ps. However, it does not sufficiently explicate the mechanisms capturing *how* stakeholders' responses and analytical levels are interlinked. In our view, the merits of the *process approach to paradox* by Jarzabkowski and colleagues (2013), which builds on the key concepts of the paradox lens provided by Lewis (2000) and Smith and Lewis (2011), is that it takes into account the interlinking and intersecting co-existing paradoxical tensions which may operate at the different analytical levels. Moreover, it focuses on how these paradoxical tensions may be differently experienced and (defensively or actively) managed by stakeholders, possibly resulting in paradoxical outcomes.

Key concepts of our paradox lens and research questions

Following the definition of paradox presented in our introduction section, Lewis (2000) offers a framework to understand paradoxical *tensions* underlying paradox (see also the introduction to this special issue). Since paradoxical tensions are inherent to organizations and organizing, all intra-organizational stakeholders have to deal with them in some way or another. Lewis (2000) states that *paradoxical tensions* stem from polarised cognitive and social constructions due to stakeholders differentiating the one pole (e.g., flexibility) of a phenomenon (e.g., employability) from the other (e.g., commitment). This polarisation can mask the simultaneity and interwoven character of conflicting truths, rather than viewing the poles as being two sides of the same coin. In many situations, therefore, stakeholders may treat paradoxical tensions as dilemmas involving 'either-or-responses', merely focusing on one pole whilst ignoring the other. Paradoxical tensions may be enhanced by such *defensive and reinforcing responses*, rather than being *explored and actively managed* by consciously taking both poles simultaneously into account and accepting that paradox demands a 'both-and-response'.

Paradoxical tensions (i.e., polarised cognitive and social constructions) may appear in various, though interrelated forms (Lewis, 2000, p. 763): (1) Self-referential loops in which contradictions are embedded within a cohesive statement, concept or process; (2) Mixed messages referring to inconsistencies in statements or between verbal and non-verbal responses; and (3) System contradictions referring to the fact that the above mentioned inconsistencies are objectified in systems, structures and processes. Below, four main types of paradoxes are briefly discussed.

First, *paradoxes of organizing* relate to ongoing processes of "equilibrating opposing forces that encourage commitment, trust and creativity while maintaining efficiency, discipline and order" (Lewis, 2000, p. 765). Tensions underlying this type of paradox may for example arise when market and government imposed regulatory demands for control and flexibility are contradicting yet operating simultaneously, or when multiple subsystems need to act independently, but are simultaneously part of an interdependent overarching organizational system (Jarzabkowski et al., 2013; Lewis, 2000; Smith & Lewis, 2011).

Second, in view of the complex interactions between intra-organizational stakeholders, organizing paradoxical tensions can *spill over* into contradictions within micro-level stakeholders' *roles*, as these may demand performing contradictory, opposing roles and activities. These so-called (*role*) *performing paradoxical tensions* may stem from complex, often multiple and competing organizational goals and differentiated structural units (Jarzabkowski et al., 2013, p. 247; Smith & Lewis, 2011) and may arise especially in times of restructuring when stakeholders have no clear structure or template on how to behave in new situations.

Third, the discussed paradoxes may also be connected with so-called *belonging paradoxical tensions* associated with conflicting or incompatible values, beliefs and identities due to "complex relations between self and other, highlighting the problematic nature of individuality, group boundaries and globalisation" (Lewis, 2000, p. 766). Especially in times of restructuring, memberships and associated loyalties towards various intra- or extra-organizational groups are subject to change and, hence, unclear (Jarzabkowski et al., 2013; Smith & Lewis, 2011).

Fourth, so-called *paradoxes of learning* can manifest themselves in and are underlying the previous three types of paradox. In a change process, new procedures, frames of reference, or guidelines may be intended or implemented, but stakeholders may prefer or need to stick to the old ones. In fact, in order to accept the new ones, the old ones should be removed (Lewis, 2000; Smith & Lewis, 2011).

Defensive and active paradox responses. The impact that paradoxical tensions have on restructuring may depend on intra-organizational stakeholders' responses to paradox (in this study regarding their organizations' EP&Ps) which may be defensive, active, or both (Jarzabkowski et al., 2013; Lewis, 2000; Smith & Lewis, 2011). Defensive paradox responses, however, are believed to provide only short-term relief. They don't provide solutions to understand or to reconceptualise stakeholders' experiences of paradoxical tensions (Lewis, 2000). Examples of defensive paradox responses mentioned in the paradox literature are (*ibid.*): *splitting*, i.e., structurally or temporally separating the two poles of the paradox and preventing interaction which may lead to tensions; *projection*, i.e., transferring conflicting attributes or feelings, often onto a scapegoat or repository of bad feelings; *regression*, i.e., resorting to understandings or actions that have provided security in the past; *repression*, i.e., denial by blocking off awareness of tenuous experiences or memories; *reaction formation*, i.e., excessively manifesting the feelings or practice opposite to the threatening one; and *ambivalence*, i.e., the compromise of conflicting emotions.

Managing paradox with active responses, in contrast, implies exploring, coping and trying to deal with paradox on a longer-term basis, accepting paradox as an inherent work condition in order to go beyond 'reinforcing cycles' resulting from stakeholders' defensive responses to paradox (Smith & Lewis, 2011) and to "tap the potential energy, insights, and power of paradox that enable dramatic change" (Lewis, 2000, p. 762). This calls for openly and critically examining stakeholders' polarised perceptions. Active paradox responses may include (*ibid.*, 764): *acceptance*, i.e., learning to live with the paradox or willing to balance the elements' underlying tension; *confrontation*, i.e., directly addressing, discussing and working through the sources of tension by reducing social strain, for example, by using humour to release the tensions; and *transcendence*, i.e., moving to a

higher plane of understanding in which paradoxical elements are understood as complex interdependencies, rather than stakeholders' competing interests.

In conclusion, our theoretical lens which will be used to guide our empirical data analysis comprises both the key concepts of the *paradox lens* (Lewis, 2000; Smith & Lewis, 2011) and the insights from the *process approach to paradox* (Jarzabkowski et al., 2013), the latter focussing particularly on the interlinked and intersected co-existing paradoxical tensions operating at different analytical levels which can impact intra-organizational stakeholders' responses. More specifically, informed by our paradox lens, we seek to answer the following research questions in order to assess the effectiveness of our case organizations' EP&Ps:

1. Which 'organizing paradoxes' and associated 'learning paradoxes' surround the employability concept in the case organizations' EP&Ps?
2. How do these organizing and learning paradoxes relate to the goals of the case organizations' EP&Ps?
3. How have their underlying paradoxical tensions spilled over and created 'role-performance', 'belonging' and 'learning paradoxes' at the micro-level?
4. How have the paradoxical tensions experienced at the micro-level cumulatively impacted line managers' and employees' responses regarding their organizations' EP&Ps?
5. How have the case organizations' HRM managers, in turn, tried to actively go beyond 'reinforcing paradox cycles' in order to enhance the effectiveness of their EP&Ps?

Methodology

Research strategy and data collection

In this study, we investigated the interlinked responses (perceptions, attitudes and behaviours) regarding EP&Ps of three intra-organizational stakeholder groups (HRM, line management and employees, including works council and labour union representatives) in three case organizations in the Netherlands: FINORG, HIGHTECH and LOGI. In all three selected cases, HRM worried about their (formal and informal) employability practices being underused and wanted to stimulate their adoption. Due to severe reorganizations and lay-offs, employability had become an increasingly important HRM topic at FINORG and HIGHTECH, where employability was increasingly viewed as a shared responsibility for the employer, employees, and unions. Also LOGI had been challenged by tremendous changes in its market and institutional environments, but had only recently started to think about developing an integral, written-down employability policy, particularly in view of their ageing workforce. LOGI's HRM policy and Collective Labour Agreement (CLA) already included some formal employability policies, practices and regulations. Table 1 summarises the cases' profiles, strategic goals, employability definitions, and EP&Ps.

Data was collected in the period 2013-15 with the help of in total 10 HRM master students, basically using the same semi-structured interview guide developed by the au-

thors. Informants (N=36) were selected based on their organizational positions, intentionally including EP&Ps' users and non-users. Table 2 lists the informants' occupational status, organization and gender.

Table 1: Case organizations and their Employability Policy & Practices (EP&Ps)

	FINORG	HIGHTECH	LOGI
Company profile	A large financial organization operating in the financial sector, employing particularly 'white and pink collar workers'.	A large diversified multinational company operating in the high-tech industry, employing particularly 'white and pink collar workers'.	A large multi-national, world-wide operating logistic organization in the supply-chain industry characterised by demanding physical work, employing particularly 'blue collar workers'.
Strategic goal	To be the most trusted company in the financial sector.	To improve people's lives concerning health and well-being through innovation.	To be the most honoured company in the supply-chain industry by exemplifying growth, excellence and unity.
Definition employability	The ability of employees to work healthy, happy and productive within or outside the current organization, until retirement.	People's ability to work happy and vital during the life course, inside or outside HIGHTECH.	The degree to which employees are able and willing to work productively, motivated and healthy within or outside the current organization, over the life cycle.
Employability goal	Strengthening employees' position on the labour market, meanwhile increasing organizational flexibility, productivity, and quality of labour.	To improve employability to gain and maintain a strong internal and external labour market position.	To prevent forced dismissals as much as possible by providing education and training programs preferably to increase internal labour mobility potential.
Employability instruments	Training and education; Personal development plan; Digital self-help instruments (such as e-tests, e-coaching, job alerts); Internships in own or other company; Career advice; Flexible pension; Job-rotation programs; Health check; Inter-organizational collaboration program.	Personal development plan; Job rotation programs; Training and education; Inter-organizational collaboration program; Health check; Digital self-help instruments; Employability-voucher-program (e.g., seminars and coaching).	Training and education; Health check; Rotation program; Inter-organizational collaboration program; Employability toolbox including tools to make employees' work less demanding.

One-hour face-to-face interviews at the organizational sites covered information on: the informants' views on their organizations' external and internal contexts; their opinions, definitions, perceptions, and wishes regarding their organizations' EP&Ps; and their reason to adopt (i.e., design, implement and/or use or not use) the EP&Ps. HRM representatives from FINORG and LOGI also gave a two-hour interactive lecture at the university about the background and content of their organizations' EP&Ps. To improve the study's internal validity and reliability, the interviews were recorded, transcribed and returned to the informants for verification or correction. In addition, policy

documents, CLAs, annual reports, and website information on the organization's EP&Ps were analysed.

Table 2: Overview of respondents and their characteristics

Respondent	Occupational group	Department	Organization	Gender
1	HRM Manager	HRM	FINORG	Male
2	HRM Developer	HRM	FINORG	Male
3	HRM Business partner	HRM	FINORG	Female
4	HRM Manager	HRM	LOGI	Female
5	HRM Officer	HRM	LOGI	Female
6	HRM Manager	HRM	HIGHTECH	Male
7	HRM Specialist	HRM	HIGHTECH	Female
8	HRM Specialist	HRM	HIGHTECH	Female
9	Line Manager	Technical (ICT)	FINORG	Male
10	Line Manager	Warehouse	LOGI	Male
11	Line Manager	Warehouse	LOGI	Male
12	Line Manager	Commercial (Finance)	HIGHTECH	Male
13	Line Manager	Commercial (Education)	HIGHTECH	Male
14	Line Manager	Technical (Engineering)	HIGHTECH	Male
15	Line Manager	Technical (Mechanical/Engineering)	HIGHTECH	Male
16	Line Manager	Commercial (Recruitment)	HIGHTECH	Female
17	Line Manager	Commercial (quality/regulatory affairs)	HIGHTECH	Male
18	Training Consultant (works council member)	Commercial (Education) and works council	FINORG	Female
19	Contract Manager	Commercial (Marketing)	LOGI	Male
20	Engineer	Technical (Engineering)	LOGI	Male
21	Administrative Assistant	Commercial (customer service)	LOGI	Female
22	Operator	Warehouse	LOGI	Male
23	Engineer	Technical (Engineering)	HIGHTECH	Female
24	Financial Employee	Commercial (Finance)	HIGHTECH	Male
25	Engineer	Technical (Engineering)	HIGHTECH	Male
26	Administrative Assistant	Commercial (Customer service)	HIGHTECH	Female
27	Project Officer	Commercial (Diversity and inclusion)	HIGHTECH	Female
28	Administrative Assistant	Commercial (Sales and Business)	HIGHTECH	Female
29	Regulator	Commercial (quality/regulatory affairs)	HIGHTECH	Male
30	Clerical Assistant	Commercial (secretary)	HIGHTECH	Female
31	Coordinator	Commercial (Representative advisory board)	HIGHTECH	Male
32	Regulator	Commercial (quality/regulatory affairs)	HIGHTECH	Male
33	Product and Pricing Officer	Commercial (Product Catalogue and Pricing)	HIGHTECH	Female
34	Administrative Assistant	Commercial (HRM)	HIGHTECH	Female
35	Application Specialist	Technical (Product Development)	HIGHTECH	Male
36	Engineer	Technical (Engineering)	HIGHTECH	Male

Data analysis

The data analysis presented in this study was guided by the study's research problem (aim and research questions) and the key concepts and insights of the paradox lens presented in Section 2.

In a first step, following a logic of constant comparison, we analysed the documents and interviews with the cases' *HRM representatives* focussing on: the organizations' overall strategic and employability goals, the case organizations' internal (workforce, technology, culture, history), external market (product, market, technology, workforce), and institutional (regulations, norms and values, competitors' HRM) contexts as perceived by these informants; and how perceived contextual developments were translated into the organizations' current, newly developed, or intended EP&Ps. For each case, we identified contradictory, but interrelated trends (cf., Lewis, 2000), some fitting, some not fitting the cases' EP&Ps. These revealed 'critical tensions' (cf., Jarzabkowski et al., 2013).

In order to increase interrater reliability, initial results were compared and similarities and differences in interpretations discussed. In case of disagreement, we read the interview transcripts together and discussed until agreement was achieved. Based on this first analytical step, we coded the 'critical tensions' underlying the adoption of the EP&Ps associated with each single case's contradictory, yet interwoven contextual developments. We further explored whether coexisting critical tensions could be linked and clustered into broader categories of 'organizing paradoxes' (Lewis, 2000). We found three 'organizing paradoxes' and two underlying 'learning paradoxes' (see Table 3) which had mainly arisen from discrepancies between market and government-imposed regulatory demands (cf., Jarzabkowski et al., 2013). When systematically comparing the data to identify the coexisting organizing paradoxical tensions, it was recognised that that their importance and intensities varied across the cases.

In a second step, our paradox lens was used to analyse *the line managers' (in short: managers) and employees' interviews*, particularly looking into how the identified organizing and learning paradoxical tensions operating at the organizational level had spilled over to managers and employees and had created 'role-performance', 'belonging' and 'learning' paradoxical tensions at the micro-level. Moreover, we analysed how these micro-level paradoxical tensions were similarly or differently experienced and mostly defensively responded to within and across the two stakeholder groups of managers and employees and how these interplayed (see also Table 3). Also cross case differences and similarities were analysed.

In a third and final step, we used our paradox lens to analyse the *HRM managers' responses* to their perceptions of paradoxical tensions and organizational members' adoption of responses regarding the EP&Ps, intending to go beyond 'reinforcing cycles' (see Table 3).

Results

Organizing and learning paradoxes associated with EP&Ps

In order to answer our first research question, we identified and labelled three organizing paradoxes which had led to or had become overt after the introduction of the organizations' EP&Ps:

- (1) '(Inverted) flexibility/commitment' paradox;
- (2) 'Self-management/(human resource) management' paradox; and
- (3) 'Sustainability/effectiveness and efficiency' paradox.

In addition, two learning paradoxical tensions were revealed:

- (1) The (fundamental) new vision on the employment relationship and psychological contract (cf., Hiltrop, 1995) underpinning the new or intended EP&Ps were embedded in 'old' labour market regulations, labour conditions, and organizational cultures, valuing the 'paternalistic employment relationship' in which organizations rather than individuals were mainly responsible for lifetime employment and career advancement (cf., Clarke & Patrickson, 2008). The analysis showed that particularly the existing institutional labour market regulations and labour conditions, such as the permanent labour market contract, the redundancy package, and employees' relative high wages, were accountable for the lack of stimuli for managers and employees to invest in employability, limiting internal, but especially external mobility.
- (2) The new vision on employability had been embedded in poor intra-organizational communication (cf., Bowen & Ostroff, 2004) with line management and employees, and was not institutionalized in new organizational structures. HRM's lack of communication and awareness of managers' and employees' needs for more training, support and time available to be able to take on their new role regarding the implementation and use of the EP&Ps can be taken as accountable for the micro-level stakeholders' adoption of defensive responses, hampering organizational learning.

In order to answer our second research question, we will elaborate the organizing (see columns in Table 3) and learning paradoxes (see final column in Table 3) below. Moreover, we will pay attention to how these relate to the multiple and often competing goals of the case organizations' EP&Ps. In order to answer our third and fourth research questions, we will look at how each of the three organizing paradoxes identified have spilled over and created role-performance and belonging (see rows in Table 3) and learning paradoxical tensions at the micro-level (see final column in Table 3). Our findings presented below particularly reveal the micro-level stakeholders' (often polarised) responses (perceptions, attitudes and behaviours) regarding their organizations' EP&Ps in view of contextual change (also summarised in Table 3). In order to answer our fifth research question, the results section concludes by presenting HRM's attempts to actively go beyond reinforcing cycles as these were recognised to impede the EP&Ps' effectiveness (see final row in Table 3).

Table 3: Paradoxical tensions impacting stakeholders' responses to Employability enhancing Policies & Practices (EP&Ps)

Organizing paradoxes (HRM):	1) 'Inverted' flexibility/commitment paradox'	2) 'Self-management/ (human-resource) management paradox'	3) 'Sustainable work /effectiveness and efficiency paradox'	Learning paradoxes:
Spill over of organizing paradoxical tensions creating new tensions underlying micro-level stakeholders' (line managers and employees) responses (perceptions, attitudes and behaviours):				1) EP&Ps are embedded in old labour market regulations, labour market conditions, and organizational cultures. 2) EP&Ps are poorly communicated and not institutionalised, resulting in a lack of awareness of its goals and associated with reorganization.
Prioritized poles:	The 'commitment pole' is prioritised over the 'flexibility' pole.	Managers and employees do not take their role responsibilities in the implementation and use of EP&Ps.	The 'effectiveness and efficiency' pole is prioritised over the sustainable work pole.	
Defensive paradox responses to (role) performance paradoxical tensions [type of defensive paradox response in italics in between brackets (cf., Lewis, 2000)]:	1) Managers and employees only (want to) use EP&Ps for employees' intra-organizational roles (<i>regression</i>); 2) Managers stress internal and upward mobility in EP&Ps communication with employees to enhance commitment (<i>reaction formation</i>).	1) Managers make a distinction between traditional employability tools and the voucher system (<i>splitting</i>); 2) Managers consider the focus of the voucher system too general and not sufficiently customised to be used (<i>ambivalence</i>); 3) Managers express a lack of awareness, willingness, and capability to perform their new role regarding the implementation of the EP&Ps (<i>repression/projection</i>). Scapegoats (projection): 1) Goals and roles regarding the EP&Ps are insufficiently communicated and have negative connotation. 2) Lack of willingness of the employees. 3) Lack of managers' support. 4) High salaries and good working conditions reduce mobility, especially in times of restructuring. 5) Differentiated structural levels in organizations' social security, employability, and budgeting systems restrain implementation and use of EP&Ps. 6) Time investments in EP&Ps are too costly.	Scapegoats (projection): 1) 'LEAN management' stressing effectiveness and efficiency, in practice leading to work intensification; 2) Short-term team performance goals (effectiveness and efficiency) come at the expense of long-term employability/ sustainability goals; 3) Current social-security system pressures employees to prioritise own financial goals over sustainable/mobility goals.	
Active paradox responses to (role) performance paradoxical tensions:	1) Few managers accept that external mobility might increase employees' career satisfaction (<i>acceptance</i>).			

Table 3: Paradoxical tensions explaining stakeholders' responses to Employability enhancing Policies & Practices (EP&Ps) (continued)

Organizing paradoxes stimulating HRM's adoption of EP&Ps:	1) '(Inverted) flexibility/commitment paradox'	2) 'Self-management/(human resource) management paradox'	3) 'Sustainability/effectiveness and efficiency paradox'	Learning paradoxes:
Spill over of organizing paradoxical tensions creating new tensions underlying micro-level stakeholders' (line managers and employees) responses (perceptions, attitudes and behaviours):				1) EP&Ps are embedded in old labour market regulations, labour market conditions, and organizational cultures. 2) EP&Ps are poorly communicated and not institutionalised, resulting in a lack of awareness of its goals and associated with reorganization.
Defensive paradox responses to belonging paradoxical tensions:	Managers more likely identify with organizational employability goals when it relates to higher educated and valued workers. Temporary workers have no access to EP&Ps, partly due to the lack of trust in the employment relationship.	Higher salaried workers receive higher employability budgets.	Managers do not identify with (future) sustainability problems of (elderly) workers; Employees do not identify with their organizations' EP&Ps goals to create a flexible workforce and increase internal and external mobility.	
HRM's future attempts to actively go beyond 'reinforcing paradox cycles':	Developing formal EP&Ps: HRM acknowledges the paradoxical tensions and tries to find a balance by developing a formal EP&Ps, including a shift towards more temporary workers and enhancing internal mobility (<i>acceptance</i>). Stimulating intra- and extra organizational communication regarding EP&Ps: Future investment in customisation, accessibility, promotion of HRM's intended EP&Ps, including negotiation with labour unions to reduce the redundancy package in exchange for EP&Ps (<i>confrontation</i>). Stimulating radical change in old labour market regulations, conditions and cultures: Searching for solutions for paradoxical tensions associated with the use of EP&Ps by reframing labour market system assumptions and radically transform social-security rules and regulations, shifting from curative mobility to preventive mobility, demanding a reallocation of resources in favour of permanent investment in lifelong employability (<i>transcendence</i>).			

Performance and belonging paradoxes impacting micro-level responses to paradox

The '(inverted) flexibility/commitment paradox'

The first organizing paradox identified in our data relates to the poles 'flexibility' and 'commitment'. Both poles relate to employability (Van der Heijde & Van der Heijden, 2006). The 'traditional' flexibility/commitment paradox has already been mentioned in the employability literature. It stresses organizations' fear of a loss of commitment and external mobility resulting from employability investments (De Cuyper & De Witte, 2011; Van der Heijde & Van der Heijden, 2006). This is also known as the 'cherry picking problem' (Sieben, 2007).

In two of our cases (HIGHTECH and FINORG), however, HRM expressed an ‘inverted’ version of the ‘cherry picking problem’. Employees’ internal labour market orientation and long-term commitment were no longer HRM’s main goals. In fact, market trends had demanded all three cases to pay more attention to employability in order to enhance the organizations’ adaptability, flexibility, effectiveness and efficiency. In view of this, HRM wanted to attract and develop skilled and committed workers who could both easily rotate in their work (i.e., functional flexibility), and who were also focussed on external mobility. Although HIGHTECH clearly aimed for highly motivated workers being committed to the goals of the organization, the HRM manager considered employability quite paradoxical:

“You need to facilitate employees with regards to work, environment and ambiance. At the same time, that constrains exit intentions or mobility.”

The ‘inverted flexibility/commitment paradox’ was expressed even more strongly by HRM professionals at FINORG. After the financial crisis and in view of the severe past and future re-organizations and associated lay-offs, FINORG’s new HRM-mission had become to be the “*most trusted employer*”. However, in line with Dutch labour market trends, all new employees were given temporary contracts, and the odds of gaining permanent employment were low. Therefore, FINORG had purposefully started to use the rhetoric of employability to build a new employment relationship and new psychological contract with employees, meanwhile trying to reconstitute the former “*organizational community identity*” and commitment which fitted the organization’s cooperative background. “*We think employability might do the trick.*” To make up for the loss of job security, FINORG would offer some new securities in terms of employability:

“We want a new relationship with employees... we say, come to our organization, work with us, we are a community... But it won’t be lifelong employment... So when you start, you get two securities: An ‘employability budget along the way’ and an amount of money at the end. And I think that is a fair new deal based on lifelong employability instead of lifelong employment.” (HRM manager, FINORG).

LOGI increasingly used temporary agency workers to enhance their (numerical) flexibility. In fact, the increased flex-ratio mentioned in formal documents had become one of the building blocks of the organization’s strategy to cope with heavily fluctuating daily production volumes. However, HRM professionals at LOGI still stressed employees’ long-term organizational commitment, internal careers, and avoiding outflows, particularly due the transaction costs associated with staff replacement. Therefore, LOGI’s intended EP&Ps rather aimed at investing in permanent employees’ health and employability to signal their appreciation.

Micro-level paradox responses: In line with our process model of paradox, the organizing paradox can be associated with role-performance and belonging paradoxical tensions which had an impact on managers’ and employees’ responses to paradoxical tensions. However, whereas HRM at HIGHTECH and FINORG experienced tensions related to the ‘inverted’ flexibility/commitment paradox, micro-level stakeholders experienced paradoxical tensions which rather reflected the ‘traditional’ cherry-picking problem, which explains their typical *defensive responses* to the EP&Ps.

In all cases, employees were keen on staying in their organizations, regardless of having invested in employability (cf., De Cuyper & De Witte, 2011). In view of their

own performance goals, also most managers aimed at preventing ‘cherry picking’. They were not willing to use the employability budget for other purposes than those related to employees’ internal organizational roles (Manager 2, HIGHTECH). In line with this, in all three cases, also a *belonging paradox* was revealed: managers expressed to identify more with the employability goals of higher educated and valued workers, than with lower educated and less valued workers. In case employability investment was stimulated, managers aimed to enhance commitment and rather stressed internal employability and career prospects than external mobility.

“Of course, there is always the risk that people leave the organization, that you can’t avoid, that is part of the game. However, what you need to do is to constantly give people the feeling that they can proceed in this organization. Hence, what we do in performance appraisals, I say, you are doing well, if you continue like this, in two years, you can be promoted to that particular job, of course, that helps. I think, career planning is what is needed [AUTHORS: to retain people].” (Manager 2, HIGHTECH).

At LOGI, like HRM respondents, managers also highly valued commitment. For achieving their own performance goals, managers strongly depended on permanent workers who knew how to do the physically demanding and dangerous work in the warehouse in line with strict safety regulations. Consequently, they also favoured job rotation of permanent staff to hiring temporary workers (Line manager 2, LOGI). In fact, in all three cases, the formally implemented EP&Ps only applied to permanent staff members creating belonging paradoxical tensions, potentially leading to inequalities between permanent and temporary workers. When confronted with this source of inequality, the HRM-manager at FINORG admitted:

“This is a problem for HRM, also for HR professionals, because do you think it is fair [AUTHORS: inequalities in access to EP&Ps between permanent and temporary workers]? We are about fairness in our organization.”

These *belonging paradoxical tensions* could also be attributed to managers being more likely to identify and, hence, to invest in workers’ employability when they had a good relationship with them and trusted that they would be motivated. Both HRM and managers admitted that long-term trust relationships would be harder to achieve in more flexible labour markets.

Only few managers responded actively to the flexibility/commitment paradoxical tensions by *accepting* (Lewis, 2000):

“If a person can improve his position, I still rather prefer that this person will remain at HIGHTECH, in a different department... and that one still can enjoy the advantages [AUTHORS: of having this employee]. However, if I notice, this might sound silly, that one of my employees has a great talent for being a medical doctor... Go for it! Since it is your development. And maybe I will be in trouble then...” (Manager 1, HIGHTECH).

The ‘self-management/ (human resource) management’ paradox

The second ‘organizing paradox’ identified relates to the poles ‘self-management’ (‘autonomy’) and ‘(human resource) management’ (‘control’) both underlining the character of the EP&Ps. The associated tensions were shown to be rooted in old labour market rules and regulations and contemporary (labour) market developments which had pressured the cases to shift to employees’ self-management regarding their employability and labour market careers. At the same time, however, the case organizations still

wanted to control employability investment by developing an EP&P. Doing so, however, they wanted to shift their own HRM activities from “*organizing for curative mobility towards preventive mobility*” (HRM manager, FINORG).

The rationale for this shift was as follows. Due to the introduction of new production techniques and ICT, administrative job categories at FINORG had become almost obsolete. In view of the loose labour market, however, the organization’s curative mobility regulations had become very costly and difficult to put into practice. HRM considered permanent investment in employability by both the employees and the employer a necessity to enhance internal and external mobility and prevent redundant workers from becoming unemployed. HRM, however, was still struggling with shaping, achieving and balancing self-management versus HR management.

Also at HIGHTECH, innovative EP&Ps were developed due to the costs associated with past and anticipated lay-offs and the need to “*loosen the ties with personnel.*” (HRM specialist 1, HIGHTECH). In compliance with the Collective Labour Agreement, HIGHTECH had introduced an ‘employability voucher system’ “*to create awareness that employees are responsible for their own development and career*” (HRM specialist 1, HIGHTECH). Anticipating the new dismissal law, which would weaken employees’ labour market position, HRM considered self-managed employability enhancement (“*take ownership*”) as especially important for employees. However, it was simultaneously deemed beneficial for HIGHTECH, as it was expected to enhance adaptability to (labour) market changes at lower costs, which legitimated HRM’s investments in the EP&Ps.

Micro-level paradox responses: At HIGHTECH, HRM had shifted the responsibility for the implementation of the EP&Ps to line managers who were now supposed to actually ‘manage employees’ self-management’ by discussing employability issues during periodical performance appraisals sessions. This clearly created many paradoxical tensions, impacting managers’ role-taking in the EP&Ps adoption process. In their rather *defensive responses* to the role-performance paradoxical tensions they encountered, HIGHTECH’s managers made a clear distinction between the voucher system and the more traditional employability tools, focusing on training and education. Some managers, considered the focus of the voucher system too general and not sufficiently customised to their employees’ needs to be implemented in a meaningful way. Others indicated not to be aware of their new role, or not to be willing or not feeling able to perform their new role. In this regards, managers expressed several ‘scapegoats’ (Lewis, 2000) to explain their passive role-taking. Some blamed HRM for not having communicated and motivated the voucher system’s goals to them more clearly. One manager pointed out that the communication of the voucher system was associated with the reorganization which prevented adoption (Manager 1, HIGHTECH). In all cases, managers projected the underused EP&Ps on their employees’ lack of willingness to invest in employability:

“People are sometimes spoiled. They don’t take action with regard to their employability, because, at the end of the day, they expect that the organization will take care of them.” (Manager 1, FINORG).

At HIGHTECH, especially engineers were used as ‘scapegoats’ as they were viewed to expect their jobs to be ‘save’ and didn’t see the need to be mobile. In a similar vein,

however, the employees in all cases perceived their managers' lack of support to invest in employability as a reason for the low use of the EP&Ps. In fact, engineers at HIGHTECH felt they were "*pushed to remain an engineer*" since they were needed by their managers (Employee 2, Technical Department). In addition, all stakeholders stressed the comparatively high salaries and good working conditions of the permanent staff impacting the use of EP&Ps.

Another 'scapegoat' to explain managers' passive role-taking related to the differentiated structural levels and inconsistencies in the organizations' social security and employability systems:

"When we were pondering about why directors would not be interested in a more proactive [AUTHORS: employability] strategy and they [AUTHORS: preferred to] lay-off people through the redundancy plan, then we realised that this was to be attributed to the way we organize our [AUTHORS: employability] budget within the organization." (HRM manager, FINORG)

In the view of this manager, FINORG's design of the EP&Ps had created a biased incentive for managers not to use their own or their team's employability budgets. They rather adopted a passive attitude and relied on the organizations' redundancy plan to deal with the employability issue if necessary. At HIGHTECH and LOGI, managers were not always aware whether making use of the EP&Ps would come at the expense of their own budgets or not, which reduced their motivation to take on an active role in the implementation of the EP&Ps. In fact, regardless of the effect on their financial budgets, managers at HIGHTECH argued that even the time investment in employability enhancement would be too costly.

Besides the role-performance paradoxical tensions presented in this subsection, also *belonging paradoxical tensions* were revealed, also fostering inequality among employees. Whilst the employability-voucher budget at HIGHTECH applied to all occupational groups covered by the Collective Labour Agreement, at FINORG, differences in identification with worker categories were expressed by giving higher salaried employees a higher employability budget.

The 'sustainability/ effectiveness and efficiency' paradox

The third organizing paradox relates to the poles 'sustainability' and 'effectiveness and efficiency' (cf., Ehnert, 2009). Its underlying tensions are rooted in conflicting statutory health and retirement regulations' and intensified work demands, both connected with the anticipated labour market shortages caused by lower fertility rates and ageing populations (cf., Clarke, 2008). In view of the workforce's high proportions of elderly workers and workers performing physically demanding and dangerous work, LOGI feared that it would be difficult for these worker categories to keep performing at the "*top sport level*" which they considered necessary to keep margins profitable. Especially in view of the anticipated future labour market shortages, LOGI was motivated to strive to be the "*most honoured*" employer by supporting these categories' long-term sustainability, which was also enforced by the Dutch security and safety regulations, the higher statutory retirement-age, and by LOGI's Collective Labour Agreement.

Whereas sustainability was not emphasised that much in the interviews at FINORG, at HIGHTECH, sustainable work was an important strategic goal for HRM

respondents, being catalysed by the reorganizations. HRM at HIGHTECH would consider it “*fantastic*” if people were capable themselves to work over the full lifecycle in a vital, strong, and energetic way, always enjoying work. However, it was clear that HRM practitioners struggled to manage the opposing and simultaneous demands for sustainable work and effectiveness and efficiency. In contrast to the Collective Labour Agreement, therefore, HRM actors considered promoting and supporting external mobility as a viable solution.

“I think that for the employee, it will be much more fun [AUTHORS: external mobility], since at present one often witnesses people of which you might think that they do not belong here anymore... And I think that is very sad...if someone, who is over 50 or over 55 and who does not fit anymore... Which tools do you have to comfort one another, how does one continue until the age of 67?” (HRM manager, HIGHTECH).

Micro-level paradox responses: At the micro-level, the ‘sustainability/effectiveness and efficiency’ organizing paradoxical tensions had clearly spilled over and created role-performance paradoxical tensions, also impacting the adoption of EP&Ps. Several ‘scapegoats’ were mentioned. All managers experienced ‘a lack of time’ to simultaneously meet the often contradictory organizational goals regarding sustainability, on the one hand, and effectiveness and efficiency, on the other. For example, at FINORG, it was recognised that LEAN production principles, introduced to optimise work processes by increasing effectiveness (‘doing the right things’) and efficiency (‘doing the things right’), did not fit with employability investment:

“It’s very good and applaudable [AUTHORS: the EP&Ps’ sustainability goals], but theory and practice are really two different worlds... Suppose you follow an educational program, the manager will then lose the people and the work can no longer be done.” (Employee 1, Commercial Department, FINORG).

Due to the influence of American companies, stakeholders at HIGHTECH also experienced higher work pressures to meet performance goals and, generally, employability goals were definitely not their prime focus. Although some did see a potential return on investments in employability, due to busy time schedules, it was considered a ‘paradoxical challenge’:

“When you don’t invest in people, you don’t develop them, which affects organizational growth. However, when you are so busy working towards organizational growth, you don’t have time to develop your people. Hence, there is always this contradiction” (Manager 1, HIGHTECH).

Although both managers and employees at HIGHTECH and FINORG considered employability important, meeting short-term performance goals was deemed more important than long-term employability goals. Hence, no time could be spent on investing in employees’ long-term sustainability, let alone focusing on the problem of internal or external mobility favouring elderly workers’ sustainability. This latter finding also reveals *belonging paradoxical tensions* reflecting managers not prioritising the elderly workers’ interest. Also at LOGI, due to them prioritising performance, managers were more focused on meeting productivity goals than stimulating employability (Manager 1, LOGI). This attitude was internalised by LOGI’s employees who felt that during performance appraisals, it was difficult to bring long-term career perspectives to the table.

Employees at HIGHTECH and LOGI, particularly elderly workers having a permanent contract, indicated that the social security system was the main reason for not favouring external mobility as a means to enhance sustainable working. External mobility was certainly not in line with balancing the organizations' and the elderly workers' (financial) goals effectively:

“Look, since I have been working for the company for 30 years, of course, it is in my interest to also receive my pension at HIGHTECH... If I had to leave the organization, I would do anything to be able to stay...” (Employee 3, Commercial Department, HIGHTECH).

The quote above reveals that not all employees automatically identified with the EP&Ps' goals simultaneously striving for sustainability and effectiveness and efficiency by creating a flexible, employable workforce. This reveals *belonging paradoxical tensions* among employees:

“It's very dynamic with all those reorganizations... It might be in the organization's interest [AUTHORS: the adoption of the EP&Ps]... To make it easier for them to dismiss their employees in case of restructuring...” (Employee 5, Commercial Department, HIGHTECH).

HRM managers' attempt to actively go beyond reinforcing cycles

Most HRM professionals were aware of the learning paradoxes underlying and being manifested in the paradoxical tensions experienced by the intra-organizational stakeholders. The responses to this reflected their willingness to actively manage the paradoxical tensions by rethinking and discussing possible solutions which could promote long-term and sustainable employability. The intended active management responses, however, varied across the three cases.

By paying attention to health, vitality, and job rotation in view of the ageing workforce, LOGI's response can be labelled *acceptance* (Lewis, 2000), intending to balance the elements underlying the paradoxical tensions. HRM expected the flex-ratio (permanent versus temporary workers) to rise from 70%-30% towards 60%-40%. Moreover, they planned to replace their 'costly' flexible retirement system (allowing elderly employees extra leisure time) with new EP&Ps. These were supposed to allow the organization to continuously develop a skilled, vital and healthy workforce. LOGI planned to bundle and formalise the existing employability practices and to convince the labour unions, managers and employees of the need of proactive and internal labour market oriented EP&Ps. However, they did not intend to include temporary agency workers in their employability policy. Hence, belonging paradoxes would remain.

At HIGHTECH, HRM planned to further negotiate with unions who already agreed upon the voucher system. Their response may be labelled *confrontation* (Lewis, 2000). Until the time of the data collection, HIGHTECH did not seem to have managed the paradoxical tensions. The EP&Ps and particularly the employability voucher system were not warmly embraced and understood at the micro-level. Despite the fact that HIGHTECH had shown to have invested in organizing for employability, this appeared not to be sufficient. In fact, access to EP&Ps was rather biased towards highly valued workers, being subject to their managers' needs. HRM did recognise the need to invest more in customisation, accessibility and communication and promotion of future

EP&Ps. Despite the lack of communication, however, legitimated by the investments in their EP&Ps, HRM felt that it would be acceptable to reduce the redundancy package. Although the representative of the works council did not support this idea, he argued that the redundancy payment could also be spent during a worker's intra-organizational career. However, he also worried that this would lead to higher labour costs, which would affect the organization's competitive market position. This might lead to further downsizing and restructuring. Acknowledging the multiple, often conflicting goals associated with employability, he proclaimed: "*it is very complicated to find a balance in this regards.*" (Employee member, Works Council, HIGHTECH).

HRM at FINORG appeared especially aware of the complex interdependencies and paradoxical tensions which FINORG viewed accountable for the lack of use of the EP&Ps. In fact, the HRM managers' vision on future employability went beyond *accepting* (Lewis, 2000) the organization's co-responsibility in finding possibilities for employees who can't find work elsewhere. By shifting the focus in the direction of employability, HRM aimed to *transcend* (Lewis, 2000) the paradoxical tensions by moving to a higher plane of understanding. Moreover, in future discussions, HRM aimed to *confront* (Lewis 2000) the unions and break out of the reinforcing cycles imposed by the labour market system in order to *reframe* its assumptions and come up with creative solutions to support sustainable employability. In FINORG's vision, this would demand a radical transformation of the social security rules and regulations shifting from 'curative mobility,' such as the redundancy package, towards 'preventive mobility:' "*as long as you have a redundancy package, you won't have preventive mobility.*" In order to achieve this, HRM suggested a gradual reallocation of resources currently spent on the redundancy payment as a means to stimulate permanent investment in lifelong employability. By also discussing this idea in public debates, FINORG aimed to promote its vision on employability in order to stimulate other employers to follow them. This was clearly intended as stimulating 'corporate social responsibility,' which was taken to mean that 'cherry picking' which is normally feared would become the new norm. In future employability programs, temporary agency workers might be even included. Meanwhile, the organization could gain social acceptance and legitimacy through the employability program, just because they invested in employees' lifelong employability.

Conclusion and discussion

Contributions

Our study aims to advance the scholarly and societal employability debates in the HRM literature by evaluating the effectiveness of EP&Ps in three case organizations in the Netherlands. Although some scholars predict that HRM professionals would be never willing to "sell" (Baruch, 2001) employability to employees as a replacement for long-term commitment and loyalty and trust based relationships, we have shown how our case organizations felt pressured by institutional and market developments to actually do so by adopting innovative employability policies and practices (EP&Ps). Due to its capability to critically capture complex phenomena, we used paradox (cf., Jarzabkowski et al., 2013; Lewis, 2000) as a fruitful lens to reframe the employability concept and examine the paradoxes and tensions surrounding EP&Ps. Below, we will discuss the main findings which answer our five research questions. Moreover, we will argue how

these can be used to inform future HRM research and policies on the effectiveness of employability policies and practices.

Our paradox lens has enabled us to contribute to the employability debates in the HRM literature and to the literature on paradox in several ways. First, we identified three organizing paradoxes (see also contribution 2 below) and two learning paradoxes surrounding the EP&Ps, being rooted in simultaneous, but opposing developments in the organizations' complex market and institutional environments. The two learning paradoxes referred to new HRM policies being embedded in old systems, processes and cultures and the insufficient communication on the multiple and conflicting goals of the new EP&Ps and how stakeholders can deal with these simultaneously.

Second, in line with the inherently paradoxical nature of the multi-dimensional employability concept (Van der Heijde & Van der Heijden, 2006), and referring to the EP&Ps' multiple, but often opposing strategic goals (cf., Lewis, 2000), we labelled these: (1) the '(inverted) flexibility/commitment' paradox; (2) the 'self-management/ (human resource) management' paradox; and (3) the 'sustainability/effectiveness and efficiency' paradox.

Third, our paradox lens further allowed us to examine how these organizing and learning paradoxes had spilled over and created important role-performance, belonging and learning paradoxical tensions at the micro-level, which are summarised in Table 3.

Fourth, our lens also allowed us to analyse how these tensions, in turn, impacted the line managers' and employees' responses to paradox (perceptions, attitudes and behaviours) (see Table 3), which impeded the EP&Ps' effectiveness. We particularly showed how micro-level stakeholders mainly defensively prioritised one particular pole of an organizing paradox (i.e., commitment, human-resource management, and effectiveness and efficiency, respectively) over the other (i.e., flexibility, self-management, and sustainability, respectively). Importantly, employability needs of the higher educated, higher salaried, and permanent workers were prioritised, meanwhile creating inequalities among employees regarding access to EP&Ps. Whilst recognising the employability needs of elderly workers, in one case, also HRM rather opted for external mobility which anticipated the role-performance paradoxical and belonging paradoxical tensions felt by managers and employees at the micro-level. The learning paradoxes operating at all analytical levels showed that passive responses (by all stakeholders, including HRM) could be attributed to the lack of adjustment of the (intra- and extra-) organizational systems, processes and cultures and the lack of (intra-organizational) communication on the policies' goals and the roles micro-level actors have therein.

Fifth, the paradox lens also helped to understand how HRM managers tried to actively escape *vicious circles* of paradoxical tensions (cf., Lewis, 2000). To some extent, HRM was shown to acknowledge the paradoxical tensions and to find a balance between the various poles of organizing paradoxes associated with employability. For example, they aimed to further develop formal EP&Ps, meanwhile paying attention to both flexibility and commitment. This we labelled *acceptance* (Lewis, 2000). In order to do so, HRM planned to invest in customisation, accessibility, and promotion of HRM's intended EP&Ps, including negotiation with labour unions to reduce the redundancy package in exchange for EP&Ps (*confrontation*) (ibid.). To some extent, HRM aimed to

stimulate radical change by reframing the assumptions of the current labour market system and radically transforming social-security rules and regulations, shifting from curative mobility to preventive mobility, demanding a reallocation of resources in favour of permanent investment in lifelong employability (*transcendence*) (ibid.).

Limitations and future research

One of the limitations of our study is that our results can only be generalised to some extent, as we only focussed on three private-sector organizations in the Dutch context. However, the macro-level trends affecting the adoption of EP&Ps in our case organizations can be expected to also pressure organizations in other sectors or nations to introduce EP&Ps in order to keep workers employable (skilled, proactive, flexible, committed, and balanced) (cf., Van der Heijde & Van der Heijden, 2006), such that they can work longer and more sustainably over the employee life cycle. Future research on EP&Ps is called for and could look into: (1) The effectiveness of EP&Ps in sectors or national contexts characterised by other political and social security systems and labour market structures and cultures; (2) The long-term effects of EP&Ps, particularly in view of labour markets becoming tighter again; (3) The perceptions, attitudes and (passive and active) role-taking behaviours regarding employability by *extra-organizational labour market stakeholders*, since they also need to balance multiple and often opposing goals in changing contexts, which may overlap or deviate from those of the *intra-organizational stakeholders* in this study. Moreover, they might be the key to responding effectively to learning paradoxical tensions.

Policy implications

The paradox lens may also inform HRM practitioners and other labour market stakeholders to *reframe* the employability problem. In scholarly and societal employability debates (cf., Van Dam, 2004), micro-level factors are often held accountable for EP&Ps' effectiveness. The paradox lens (e.g., Lewis, 2000), however, shifts the attention to the sources of the employability problem which are often overlooked as their origins may be situated mainly outside organizational borders and, hence, outside the direct circle of influence of intra-organizational stakeholders. In fact, the learning paradoxes identified in our study imply that not only the lack of adjustment of *internal* stakeholders should be looked into. Also *external* labour market systems, processes and cultures need to be adapted. However, it is obvious that any response to paradoxical tensions will create serious new tensions (ibid.). In fact, current plans for labour market de-regulation regarding resignations are highly debated as the enhanced labour market flexibility and mobility often comes at the expense of social and work security. Meanwhile, however, our results show that access to EP&Ps, which is actually presented as the 'new labour market protection' (cf., Pruijt & Dérogée, 2010), will be subject to new labour market inequalities. In view of this, the employability issue may demand the traditional 'cherry picking problem' (Sieben, 2007) to be reframed. In order to do so, labour market stakeholders need to be prepared to collectively share the responsibilities for equal access to EP&Ps for all labour market participants. If employability is 'to do the trick,' moral values as well as economic values should play a role to ensure balanced labour markets (Paauwe, 2004). Given its capacity to critically reframe complex problems, the paradox

lens may help labour market stakeholders to continuously reflect on, discuss and collectively manage paradoxical tensions to develop creative, sustainable and fair management solutions for contemporary employability issues.

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