COMPETENCY DEVELOPMENT AND CAREER SUCCESS:

THE MEDIATING ROLE OF EMPLOYABILITY

Abstract

The present study aims to unravel the relationship between competency development, employability and career success. To do so, we tested a model wherein associations between employee participation in competency development initiatives, perceived support for competency development, self-perceived employability, and two indicators of subjective career success (i.e. career satisfaction and perceived marketability) have been specified. A survey was conducted among a sample of 561 employees of a large financial services organization. The results support the idea that employee participation in competency development initiatives as well as perceived support for competency development is positively associated with workers' perceptions of employability. Moreover, self-perceived employability appeared to be positively related with career satisfaction and perceived marketability. A full mediation effect was found for the relationship between participation in competency development initiatives and both career satisfaction and perceived marketability, while a partial mediation effect was found in case perceived support for competency development was the predictor variable. The implications of our findings for understanding the process through which individuals and organizations can affect subjective career success are discussed.

Key words: Employee Participation in Competency Development Initiatives, Perceived Support for Competency Development, Self-Perceived Employability, Career Satisfaction, Perceived Marketability

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The current economic environment, characterized by ever-increasing market pressures, leaner organizations and rapid changes has forced working organizations to become more flexible in order to remain competitive (Lazarova & Taylor, 2009), and this has implications for individuals' present-day career development. A central tenet in current career theories is that in so-called 'new careers' the promise of employment security is said to be replaced by employability (e.g., Fugate & Kinicki, 2008; Inkson & King, 2010; Hallier, 2009). Workers' employability is obtained through the acquisition of knowledge, skills, abilities, and other characteristics that are valued by current and prospective employers and thus encompasses an individual's career potential (Fugate & Kinicki, 2008; Fugate, Kinicki & Ashforth, 2004; Van der Heijde & Van der Heijden, 2006). It can therefore be regarded as an important factor in understanding contemporary career success (Hall, 2002). However, to date, the research on employability and career success has mostly developed parallel to one another, implying a lack of insight into how employability and career success are related to each other (Van der Heijde & Van der Heijden, 2006). In addition, little research investigated the combined effects of organizational and individual initiatives in the light of employability enhancement (De Vos, Dewettinck & Buyens, 2009b).

In this contribution, we address career success from the perspective of competency development and employability. Up to now, to the best of our knowledge, no studies have been published addressing these issues. The findings of our study may add valuable insights into the role of organizational initiatives in enhancing workers' employability. From an employee's point of view, a better understanding of the critical role of participation in

competency development initiatives may positively stimulate actual efforts in this regard, herewith supporting life-long career development.

THEORY AND HYPOTHESES

Employability

Following Van der Heijde and Van der Heijden (2006), employability is defined as the continuous fulfilling, acquiring or creating of work through the optimal use of competences. These competences refer to an individual's knowledge, skills, and abilities needed to adequately perform various tasks and carry responsibilities within a job, and to their adaptability to changes in the internal and external labor market (De Cuyper et al., 2008; Fugate et al., 2004; Van Dam, 2004; Van der Heijde & Van der Heijden, 2006). Employability is conceived as a psycho-social construct, including both subjective and objective elements. In this study we focus on the subjective dimension of employability, i.e. employees' employability perceptions (McArdle, Waters, Briscoe & Hall, 2007; Fugate et al., 2004; Rothwell, Jewell & Hardie, 2009; Van der Heijde & Van der Heijden, 2006).

Employability has been studied both from an organizational perspective (e.g., Nauta, Van Vianen, Van der Heijden, Van Dam, & Willemsen, 2009; Scholarios et al., 2008) and from an individual perspective (e.g., Forrier & Sels, 2003; Fugate & Kinicki, 2008; Van der Heijden, Boon, Van der klink, & Meijs, 2009). The organizational perspective refers to HR practices aimed at optimizing the deployment of staff in order to increase the organization's flexibility and competitive advantage (Nauta et al., 2009). The individual perspective focuses on individual dispositions and behaviors (Forrier & Sels, 2003; Fugate & Kinicki, 2008; Fugate et al., 2004). In the present study, we incorporate the organizational perspective by comprehending employees' perceptions of the organization's support for competency

development as well as the individual perspective by addressing their actual participation in the initiatives offered by the organization.

Competency Development and Employability

Employability depends on continuous learning, being adaptable to new job demands or shifts in expertise, and the ability to acquire skills through lateral rather than upward career moves in varied organizational contexts (Scholarios et al., 2008). Although employability scholars underscore the importance of competency development (De Cuyper et al., 2008; Forrier & Sels, 2003) as to date most studies have used an individual difference framework when studying employability (Nauta et al., 2009). Competency development refers to those activities carried out by the organization and the employee to maintain or enhance the employee's functional, learning and career competencies (Forrier & Sels, 2003). It encompasses an integrative approach of developmental activities, involving both the organization and the employee (Sandberg, 2000; Van der Heijde & Van der Heijden, 2006). Following this conceptualization, we propose that both individuals' participation in competency development initiatives and an organizational climate supporting competency development will be positively associated with employability perceptions.

First, participation in competency development initiatives refers to how individual employees develop their competencies by actively engaging in different types of developmental activities offered by their organization, i.e., more traditional forms of formal learning activities, such as training, as well as informal learning, such as on-the-job learning, and broader career development. One earlier study has addressed the importance of participating in formal and informal learning activities for an individual's self-perceived employability (Van der Heijden et al., 2009). It was found that both types of learning activities reinforced each other, underlining the importance of including different forms of

learning activities when studying competency development (Van der Heijden et al., 2009). Although career development activities are also considered important for workers' employability (De Vos et al., 2009b), to date these activities have not been included in empirical studies addressing competency development. We expect that participating in this broader range of competency development initiatives will be positively associated with self-perceived employability.

Hypothesis 1a: Employee participation in competency development initiatives will be positively associated with self-perceived employability.

Second, perceived support for competency development refers to employees' perceptions of the organizational support provided for the development of their competencies. As suggested by Schneider, Brief, and Guzzo (1996), perceived support for development may not only enhance an individual's domain-specific knowledge or skills, but also more general perceptions of employability, an assumption supported by Campion, Cheraskin & Stevens (1994) who reported a positive association between job rotation and perceived knowledge and skill development. More recently, Nauta et al. (2009) found that an organizational culture that strongly supports individual development has a positive effect on employability orientation (operationalized as the employees' receptivity towards employability within their current organization). Building on this finding, we expect that perceived support for competency development will enhance workers' self-perceived employability as well.

Hypothesis 1b: Perceived support for competency development will be positively associated with self-perceived employability.

Employability and Career Success

Within the new career era, employability is defined as a critical condition for career success (Fugate et al., 2004; Hall, 2002; Van der Heijde & Van der Heijden, 2006), i.e. the accomplishment of desirable work-related outcomes at any point in a person's work experiences over time (Arthur et al., 2005). While objective career success is measured by indicators like organizational position or attained promotions (Arthur et al., 2005), subjective career success is measured as workers' individual perceptions of their own success, based on evaluations of personal accomplishments and future prospects (Dries, Pepermans & Carlier, 2008). In this study we include two indicators of subjective career success, consistent with this distinction between past accomplishments and future prospects, i.e. (1) career satisfaction, and (2) perceived marketability.

First, career satisfaction is widely used as one of the most relevant indicators of subjective career success (Eby et al., 2003; Heslin, 2005), and is defined as a feeling of pride and personal accomplishment that comes from knowing that one has done one's personal best (Hall, 1996). Surprisingly, despite the wide research interest in the antecedents of career satisfaction, empirical research on the relationship between self-perceived employability and career satisfaction is lacking (Ng et al., 2005).

Second, perceived marketability is defined as beliefs that one is valuable to the current or to other employers (Eby et al., 2005). In the current career context, characterized by instability and uncertainty, the extent to which individuals believe to be seen as marketable by their current or future employers is a relevant indicator of subjective career success (Bird, 1994; De Vos & Soens, 2008; Eby et al., 2003). Marketability is conceptually distinct from employability in that the latter comprises the employee's competencies (in terms of knowledge, skills, and abilities), i.e. their potential to fulfill, acquire or create new work, if necessary, while marketability refers to a positive career outcome of this potential, i.e. the perceptions regarding one's added value at the (internal or external) labor market.

We believe that self-perceived employability will be positively associated with both career outcomes. In our competency-based definition, self-perceived employability is conceived as a human capital variable and human capital theory suggests that investing in one's skills should lead to greater value in the marketplace (Becker, 1964). The contest-mobility model of career success builds on this premise by stating that, in a broader sense, human capital elements like competencies will be positively related to career success (Ng et al., 2005; Rosenbaum, 1994). However, to date, empirical research examining this relationship is scarce. Eby et al. (2003) observed a positive association between employees' skill building and career satisfaction as well as perceived marketability. Ng et al. (2005) did not find support for this relationship in their meta-analysis on the antecedents of career success but they only included education level as a competency-based indicator of human capital. In our study we empirically address their claim that a broader range of human capital predictors will be associated with career success (Ng et al., 2005).

Hypothesis 2a: Self-perceived employability will be positively associated with career satisfaction.

Hypothesis 2b: Self-perceived employability will be positively associated with perceived marketability.

Relationship between Competency Development, Employability, and Career Success

In the present study, we hypothesize that self-perceived employability will mediate the relationship between competency development and career success. The model we have developed to this point describes the impact of competency development on career success as being fully mediated by employability. Although full mediation is a possible outcome, earlier studies in the domain of career management and training and development suggest the possibility of direct associations with career success. This assumption follows from the

sponsored-mobility model of career success (Ng et al., 2005; Rosenbaum, 1994), which states that (participating in) organizational initiatives like career support and skill development opportunities will be positively related to career success. In support of this, Burke and McKeen (1994) found that employees' participation in competency development was directly related to their perception of future career prospects (Burke & McKeen, 1994), while De Vos et al. (2009b) found a direct association between perceived supervisor support for career development and career satisfaction. On the basis of this thinking, we will also empirically test for partial mediation (see Figure 1), and have formulated the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis 3a: Self-perceived employability (partially) mediates the relationship between employee participation in competency development and career satisfaction.

Hypothesis 3b: Self-perceived employability (partially) mediates the relationship between employee participation in competency development and perceived marketability.

Hypothesis 4a: Self-perceived employability (partially) mediates the relationship between perceived support for competency development and career satisfaction.

Hypothesis 4b: Self-perceived employability (partially) mediates the relationship between perceived support for competency development and perceived marketability.

-Insert Figure 1 about here-

METHOD

Sample and Procedure

A survey was conducted in a large financial institution located in Belgium, which employed about 16,000 white-collar workers at the time of our study. As is common in many large

organizations in Belgium (Forrier, Sels & Stynen, 2009), the policy of this company was to build a loyal and employable workforce by developing its employees through well-established policies in the domains of competency and career development and by working out an internal labor market providing many career perspectives apart from the traditional upward mobility. To this end, the company implemented competency development over ten years ago, and, in the meantime, has made large investments in developing a series of training practices (e.g., e-learning sessions), on-the-job learning practices (e.g., coaching and mentoring programs), and career management practices (e.g., career counseling). Most of these practices were organized in-house, and were provided to all employees.

After receiving formal approval from the financial institution, three departments were selected to participate in the study, i.e. the headquarters, ICT department, and branch offices. In cooperation with the HR department, we used simple random sampling (Cooper & Schindler, 2008) to select 350 employees of each department to be involved in the study. Hence, we invited a total of 1,050 employees to participate in an on-line survey. To minimize bias due to social desirability, we stressed the confidential treatment of all answers, and guaranteed anonymity when presenting the results of our study to the organization. In total, 651 employees filled in the questionnaire, i.e. a response rate of 62%. For the analyses, 90 employees were excluded because they had more than 10% of missing values.

Hence, the final sample comprised 561 employees (41.5% female), with a mean age of 41 years (*SD* = 9.10). The majority of the respondents held a bachelor degree (58.8%). 31.4% held a masters degree, and 14.8% held a high school degree. Furthermore, respondents had on average 17 years (*SD* = 10.4) of experience in the organization, and 7 years (*SD* = 7.4) in their current job. The majority of respondents (73.8%) were full-time employed in the organization. 33.5% of the respondents was employed at the headquarters, 34.6% was employed at the ICT department, and 31.7% was employed at the branch offices.

Measures

Employee participation in competency development initiatives was measured by means of a scale developed for this research (α = .82). The basis for this scale was an earlier qualitative case study on competency development conducted by the authors in 22 Belgian organizations, including the organization studied in the current research[1]. Based on this qualitative study, twelve items were developed to assess to what extent respondents participated in a diverse set of competency development initiatives (e.g., mentoring, training, career discussions, etcetera.). An exemplary items is: "training devoted to the improvement of your technical skills". The full list of items is provided in Appendix 1. Respondents had to indicate on a five-point Likert scale (1 = never; 5 = always) to what extent they actively engaged in making use of these initiatives. Results from exploratory factor analysis, using principal component analysis with varimax rotation, suggested that three factors were represented in the data, namely training practices (e.g., "training devoted to the improvement of general skills, such as communication"), on-the-job learning (e.g., "a coach who guides you in your personal development"), and career management practices (e.g., "career discussions with an internal career counselor"). As it was our objective to address the impact of participation in the bundle of competency development initiatives, and because there were high inter-correlations between the sub scales, the items were collapsed into one global scale.

Perceived support for competency development was also measured by a newly developed scale, based on the same qualitative case study referred to earlier (α = .82). Twelve items were selected thatassess the extent to which respondents experience support for competency development from the organization (e.g., "I receive feedback that is useful for the development of my career when I need it"). The complete list of items is provided in

[1] A paper on this study is currently under review and is available from the authors upon request.

Appendix 1. Respondents had to indicate to what extent they agreed with these statements using a five-point Likert scale (1 = totally disagree; 5 = totally agree). Results from exploratory factor analysis, using principal component analysis with varimax rotation, indicated that our data represented two factors corresponding to supervisor and colleague support (e.g., "My manager makes sure that I can develop the competencies I need for my career"), and organizational support (e.g. "My organization offers new and creative training courses"). As we were interested in the bundle of support for competency development experienced, all items were collapsed into one global scale.

Self-perceived employability was measured using eleven items adopted from Van der Heijde and Van der Heijden (2006) (α = .85). In line with previous operationalizations (e.g., De Cuyper et al., 2008; Fugate et al., 2004), we focused on two main dimensions, namely expertise and flexibility. Expertise was assessed using eight items from the 'occupational expertise' sub scale . Respondents had to indicate on a five-point Likert scale to what extent they believed to have the necessary capabilities and expertise to adequately perform various tasks and to carry responsibilities of a job (e.g., "I consider myself competent to provide information on my work in a way that is comprehensible"). Flexibility was assessed using three items from the 'personal flexibility' sub scale . Respondents had to indicate on a five-point Likert scale to what extent they believed to have the capacity to easily adapt to changes in the internal and external labor market (e.g., "I can easily adapt to changes in my workplace"). For the purpose of this study, and given the high inter-correlation between the two dimensions, all items were collapsed into one global scale.

Career satisfaction was assessed by four items from Greenhaus, Parasuraman and Wormley (1990) (α = .85). Respondents had to indicate on a five-point Likert scale to what extent they were satisfied with their career successes, career progress, income, and development progress (e.g., "I am satisfied with the success I have achieved in my career").

Perceived Marketability was assessed using the six items from the perceived internal and external marketability scales as adapted by Eby et al. (2003) (α = .79). Respondents had to indicate on a five-point Likert scale to what extent they believed to add value to their current or future employer (e.g., "My company views me as an asset to the organization").

Control variables. Age, organizational tenure, and number of promotions were assessed as control variables. As shown by previous studies, subjective career success varied based on employees' age (e.g. Ng et al., 2005) and organizational tenure (e.g. Eby et al., 2003). In addition, the number of attained promotions, as an objective indicator of career success, was argued to influence employees' subjective career success as well (e.g. Heslin, 2005; Arthur et al., 2005). All control variables were measured on a continuous scale.

Analytical Strategy

We tested the hypothesized model and included paths via structural equation modeling. For constructs with a higher-order factor structure (employee participation in competency development initiatives, perceived support for competency development, self-perceived employability, and perceived marketability), we reduced the number of parameters to be estimated following the partial aggregation method (Bagozzi & Edwards, 1998; Little, Cunningham & Shahar, 2002). This procedure involves averaging the responses of sub sets of items measuring a construct. Based on the exploratory factor analyses reported above, we formed three indicators for employee participation in competency development initiatives, and two indicators for, respectively, perceived support for competency development, self-perceived employability, and perceived marketability. Because career satisfaction was a uni-dimensional construct, we followed the procedure recommended by Little et al. (2002) to create two parcels of randomly selected items to serve as indicators for these variables.

RESULTS

Table 1 shows the descriptive statistics, scale reliabilities and inter-correlations between all variables included in the study.

- Insert Table 1 about here -

Assessment of the Structural Model

To test our conceptual model, we followed the procedure described by Bagozzi and Edwards (1998). Specifically, we compared a fully mediated model to a number of alternative models. The Chi-square test for this baseline model (see Figure 2) was significant, and thus indicated a poor fit (χ^2 = 386.31, df = 47, p < .001), a result frequently found in research using large samples (Marsch, Balla & Hau, 1996). The other fit indices also indicated a rather poor fit of the baseline model to our data (GFI = .89; CFI = .81; RMSEA = .11). In a next step, we compared this baseline model to a number of alternative models. Table 2 reports the results from these analyses. First, we compared the baseline model to our hypothesized model, i.e., a partially mediated model. We added four additional paths to the baseline model: two direct paths from employee participation in competency development initiatives to career satisfaction and perceived marketability, and two direct paths from perceived support for competency development to career satisfaction and perceived marketability. This saturated model fitted our data significantly better (χ^2 = 186.65, df = 43, p < .001; GFI = .95; CFI = .94; RMSEA = .07; $\Delta\ \chi^2$ (4) = 199.66, p < .001), but only the direct path coefficients from perceived support for competency development to career satisfaction and perceived marketability were significant (β = .52, p < .001, and β = .57, p < .001, respectively).

– Insert Table 2 about here –

Given the fact that we had not found significant paths from employee participation in competency development initiatives to career satisfaction and perceived marketability , we

compared the baseline model to a second alternative model in which we fixed the path coefficients from employee participation in competency development initiatives to both outcome variables to be zero (i.e., alternative Model 2 in Table 2). This model significantly reduced our Chi-square statistic compared to the baseline model, whilst the Chi-square statistic did not differ significantly from the partial mediation model, suggesting partial mediation for the relationship between perceived support for competency development initiatives, and career satisfaction and perceived marketability, and full mediation for the relationship between employee participation in competency development and both outcomes (χ^2 = 187.94, df = 45, p < .001; GFI = .95; CFI = .94; RMSEA = .07; $\Delta \chi^2$ (2) = 198.38, p < .001).

Finally, to assess whether an even more parsimonious model would fit our data equally well, we dropped the paths from the independent variables to self-perceived employability. This resulted in a significant decrease in the Chi-square statistic but the other fit indices suggested a poor fit of this model to the data (χ^2 = 232.73, df = 45, p < .001; GFI = .90; CFI = .89; RMSEA = .10; $\Delta \chi^2$ (2) = 153.58, p <.001), indicating that this model was not sufficiently comprehensive.

Based on these analyses, and comparisons of model fit, alternative Model 2 was retained as the final model. The pathways for this model are represented in Figure 2. Providing support for Hypothesis 1a and 1b, employee participation in competency development initiatives and perceived support for competency development initiatives were positively associated with self-perceived employability (β = .24, p < .001 and β = .15, p < .01, respectively). Self-perceived employability was positively associated with career satisfaction (β =.17, p < .001), and with perceived marketability (β =.55, p < .001), supporting Hypothesis 2a and 2b. The absence of significant direct associations between participation in competency development initiatives on the one hand, and career satisfaction and perceived marketability

on the other hand, suggests a full mediation effect of self-perceived employability in case employee participation in competency development initiatives is the predictor variable (Hypothesis 3a and 3b). For perceived support for competency development, self-perceived employability partially mediated the relationship with career satisfaction and perceived marketability (Hypothesis 4a and 4b).

- Insert Figure 2 about here –

DISCUSSION

The present study aimed to contribute to the career literature by unraveling the relationship between competency development, self-perceived employability, and career success. Evidence was provided for a model wherein self-perceived employability mediates the relationship between competency development and two indicators of career success, i.e. career satisfaction and perceived marketability.

First, our results revealed that employee participation in competency development initiatives as well as perceived support for competency development are associated with increased levels of self-perceived employability. As such, empirical support is provided for the general theoretical claim that competency development is an important means for enhancing employability (e.g., Scholarios et al., 2008; Van der Heijde & Van der Heijden, 2006). Thereby, our findings add to the scarce body of research examining either the relationship between learning and employability (Van der Heijden et al., 2009) or the relationship between career management and employability (De Vos et al., 2009b), by taking an integrative approach (both comprising individual and organizational factors) on competency development. The results also support the idea that competency development not

only relates to domain-specific knowledge or skills but also to more general perceptions of occupational expertise and flexibility (Schneider et al., 1996; Campion et al., 1994).

In addition, our findings suggest a dual effect of competency development in organizations. By including both perceived support for competency development as well as actual employee participation in competency development initiatives, the present study showed that it is not sufficient for organizations to purely provide a series of training, on-the-job learning, and career development practices of which employees can make use. Given the positive contribution of both factors, we conclude that it is also important to create a stimulating learning environment in which actual participation in competency development is supported by managers, colleagues and one's working organization. At the theoretical level this findings implies that it is relevant to include both the individual and organizational perspective when studying the antecedents of employability, rather than addressing only one of both. This is also consistent with the growing consensus in the career literature that both individual and organizational career management initiatives are important for explaining employees' career outcomes (e.g. De Vos et al., 2009b; Guest et al., 2010).

Second, empirical evidence is provided for a positive relationship between self-perceived employability on the one hand, and career satisfaction and perceived marketability on the other hand, providing empirical support for the theoretical claim that employability is a predictor of career success (Forrier & Sels, 2003; Hall, 2002; Van der Heijde & Van der Heijden, 2006). To date, no research has tapped into finding empirical proof for this association. Our findings provide further support for the idea central to the contest-mobility model of careers (Rosenbaum, 1994), that human capital elements are related with career success, and respond to the call from Ng et al., (2005) to include a broader range of human capital variables in the study of career success. In addition, to date, only a limited number of studies have included perceived marketability as an indicator of career success (De Vos &

Soens, 2008; Eby et al., 2003). As such, our study adds to the career literature by including a broader operationalization of the concept of career success that is in line with the theoretical claims about the changing nature of careers (Heslin, 2005).

Finally, our results provide support for the (partially) mediating role of self-perceived employability in the relationship between competency development and career success. More specifically, a full mediation effect of self-perceived employability was found for the relationship between employee participation in competency development initiatives and career success, while a partial mediation effect was found for the relationship between perceived support for competency development and career success. Hence, these findings underscore the importance of differentiating between these two dimensions of competency development. In general, the observation of an indirect link between competency development and career success via self-perceived employability adds to our understanding of careers by a further integration of the career literature with the employability literature. Moreover, the relationships found between competency development and career outcomes are supportive of the sponsored-mobility model of career success (Rosenbaum, 1994).

The full mediation effect of self-perceived employability in the relationship between employee participation in competency development initiatives and career success indicates that developing expertise and flexibility (being the two indicators of employability as conceptualized in this study) by actively engaging in competency development is an important mechanism through which individuals can attain career success. This finding adds to the literature wherein the construct of employability is studied from an individual level perspective and is interpreted to consist of cognitive, behavioral, and attitudinal elements (Fugate et al., 2008). The direct link between perceived organizational support for competency development and career success is consistent with previous literature in which employability has been studied from an organizational perspective and implies that a

supportive context encourages employability (Nauta et al., 2009). The finding that organizational support for competency development relates to subjective career success outcomes partly via self-perceived employability (a human capital element) supports the idea that it is important to incorporate both a contest-mobility and a sponsored-mobility approach when studying the antecedents of career success (Ng et al., 2005). Finally, these results shed new light on how organizations can affect their employees' career success in different ways, i.e., by focusing on competency development, compared to the focus on more traditional initiatives like offering career perspectives, security, or opportunities for advantage as suggested in earlier studies (e.g., Ng et al., 2005).

Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

Our study did have some limitations. First, all data were cross-sectional. This means that we cannot unequivocally determine the direction of relationships found. More research using a longitudinal design is needed to further unravel the causal relationships between participation in, and support for competency development, self-perceived employability, and career outcomes. Second, as this study took place in only one organization and in one country, further study is needed to assess the generalizability of our findings across different organizational and national contexts. The Belgian career environment is characterized by low mobility rates, with a high percentage of employees having traditional career patterns, working in regular employment and reporting only limited levels of career self-management (De Vos, De Clippeleer & Dewilde, 2009a; Forrier et al., 2009). Our sample with an average tenure of 17 years with the company is representative for this Belgian career environment but might be a-typical for other contexts. However, the fact that in such a sample, which at the outset appears to deviate from the 'new career', competency development is significantly associated with workers' employability perceptions, career satisfaction and perceived

marketability, suggests that in more boundaryless contexts these relationships might be even stronger. This is something that should be addressed in future research. Third, an interesting avenue for future (longitudinal) research would be to include objective indicators of employability and career success as well, in order to compare the predictive validity of competency development in the light of objective outcomes and perceptual measures. Given the relationship between objective and subjective career success found in many studies, it would further add to our insight into the role of competency development and employability of individuals across time and across organizations. Moreover, including objective measures would overcome the limitations inherent in studies using only self-perception data. Although self-perceptions are highly important in understanding how individuals perceive, and evaluate their organization's policies and their own career, the use of only self-perception measures holds the risk of common-method bias. The correlation between two of our scales, self-perceived employability and perceived marketability, was quite high (.55), which might indeed suggest common-method bias. However, this correlation is comparable with other studies using perceptual measures of employability and perceived marketability or other indicators of subjective career success (Eby et al., 2003; Van der Heijden et al., 2009). Fourth, it might add to our understanding of competency development and employability to not only ask respondents to report on these factors, but to relate this to the opinion of other parties (e.g., employees' direct supervisors) as well. Moreover, future research using a cross-level design in which objective measures of organizational competency development are related to employability and career success could add to our understanding.

Implications

Despite these limitations, our study has some important implications for practitioners who are interested in finding ways to stimulate workers' employability, and who want to capitalize on

the benefits of employability for both the organization and the individual employee. First, our findings underscore the importance for organizations to actively invest in the development of competencies of their employees. This investment involves both the creation of a supportive environment for developing competencies, and stimulating individuals to actively make use of the opportunities for competency development present within the organization. The benefit for the organization of doing this is clear: our findings suggest that it relates to enhanced expertise and flexibility, i.e., competencies that are, generally, considered as critical for sustained competitive advantage (Van der Heijde & Van der Heijden, 2006). Second, for employees, participating in competency development initiatives offered by their organization is important for enhancing their employability perceptions, and through this also for their feelings of career satisfaction and beliefs in their own marketability. Moreover, the direct relationship between organizational support for development and career success outcomes included in our study implies that by actively working on the sustainable development of their employees, organizations not only serve themselves but also express a form of caring for their employees' careers. From a societal perspective, this means that, especially in times when it has become painfully clear that organizational success and employment security should never be taken for granted, both organizations and individuals should be actively encouraged to take up their responsibility for their employability as a leverage for sustainable employment.

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FIGURE 1

Hypothesized Model

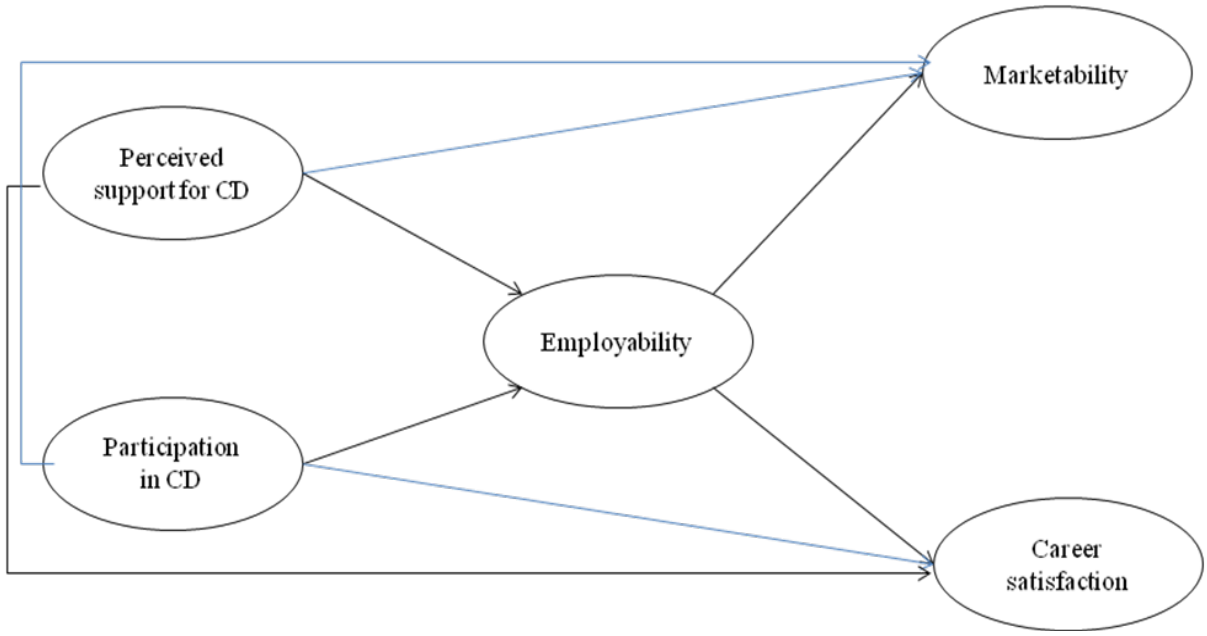
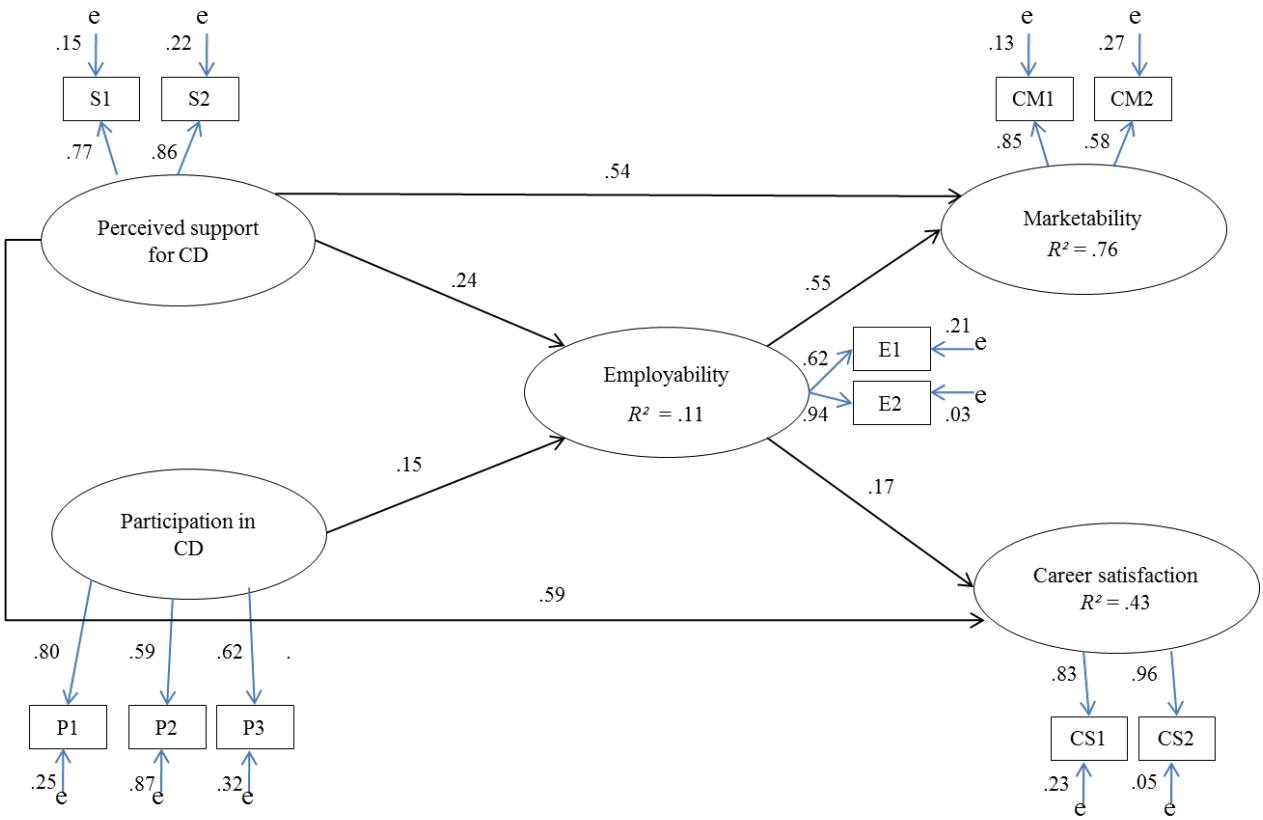


FIGURE 2

Final Model



The path coefficients represent the standardized parameter estimates for the final model (alternative Model 2 in Table 2) tested in SEM. All path coefficients are significant at the $p <$ .01 level.

CD = Competency development

TABLE 1

Means, Standard Deviations, Scale Reliabilities, and Correlations

			1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	Mean	SD							
1. Participation in CD	2.33	.73	.82						
2. Support for CD	3.24	.68	.14**	.82					
3. Employability	3.96	.47	.17**	.22**	.85				
4. Marketability	3.48	.58	.21**	.47**	.55**	.85			
5. Career satisfaction	3.50	.79	.09*	.55**	.24**	.47**	.79		
6. Age	41.17	9.10	-.18**	-.13**	-.11	-.25**	-.01	-	
7. Organizational tenure	17.02	10.36	-.22**	-.11*	-.10	-.24**	.03	.87**	-
8. Promotions	3.79	2.19	-.02	.13**	.18**	.19**	.31**	.34**	.47**

Note. $N = 561$. Alphas are on the diagonal. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

CD = Competency Development

TABLE 2

Fit Statistics of Tested Structural Models

	χ^2	df	χ^2/df	$\Delta\chi^2$	GFI	CFI	RMSEA
Baseline model: full mediation	386.31**	47	4.34	---	.89	.81	.11
Alternative Model 1: Hypothesized partial mediation model	186.65**	43	8.22	199.66**	.95	.94	.08
Alternative Model 2: Alternative model 1 participation in CD → marketability and participation in CD → career satisfaction fixed to zero	187.94**	45	4.18	198.38**	.95	.94	.07
Alternative Model 3: Alternative Model 1 participation in CD → employability and support for CD → employability fixed to zero	232.73**	45	5.17	153.58**	.90	.89	.10

Note. N = 289. GFI = Goodness of Fit Index; CFI = comparative fit index; RMSEA = root-mean-square error of approximation. Dashes represent data that were not applicable.

APPENDIX 1

Newly Developed Scales for Assessing Competency Development

Employee participation in competency development initiatives

Respondents indicated on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = never, 2 = sometimes, 3 = from time to time, 4 = often, 5 = always) how often they made use of the following initiatives or opportunities offered by their organization:

1. A more experienced colleague as a mentor who guides you in your job and from whose experience you can learn.
2. Training organized to enhance your technical competencies.
3. Training organized to enhance your general competencies, such as communication, languages, etc.
4. Training sessions held in class that focus on acquiring knowledge.
5. A coach from within the organization who guides you in your personal development.
6. Workshops in which you develop new competencies through interaction.
7. A godfather or godmother who helps you with all kinds of questions.
8. Working groups in which employees from different departments work together on the same topic.
9. Career discussions with your boss.
10. Career discussions with a career counselor from within the organization.
11. Workshops/training sessions that help you plan your career.
12. Applying for internal vacancies.

Perceived support for competency development

Respondents indicated on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = completely disagree, 2 = rather disagree, 3 = neutral, 4 = rather agree, 5 = completely agree) to what extent they agreed with the following statements:

1. I get the necessary time and means to further develop my competencies.
2. I can make use of a personal development plan to know what competencies I need to develop and how I can develop them best.
3. My boss regularly gives me feedback about my performance.
4. My organization provides new and creative training opportunities.
5. My boss makes sure that I can learn on the job by giving me challenging assignments.
6. My colleagues regularly give me feedback about my performance.
7. I can regularly change jobs within my company (without promotion) to develop new competencies.
8. My boss makes sure that I develop the competencies that I need for my career.
9. All information about career opportunities in the organization is readily available.
10. I have been given tasks that develop my competencies for the future.
11. I have been given a personal development plan to better understand my possibilities within the organization and the competencies I need to fully exploit them.
12. I have been given the possibility within my organization to develop the competencies I need to get a promotion and move to a function at a higher level of the organization.