Learning to Be Employable or Being Employable to Learn: The Reciprocal Relation Between Perceived Employability and Work-Related Learning

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Abstract

Learning to become employable is a catch phrase often used to highlight the importance of upskilling in today's knowledge-based labor market. Yet, evidence on the relationship between work-related learning and employability is limited and does not account for potential reciprocity. This is important though: if *employability* also *promotes work-related learning*, labor market segmentation could be enhanced. Accordingly, this study investigates the reciprocal relationship between (formal and informal) work-related learning and perceived (internal and external) employability. Hypotheses are based on the attribution-based theory of intrapersonal motivation, which has not yet figured in employability research. Structural equation modeling was performed on three-wave survey data of Belgian employees. The pattern of results showed a reciprocal, albeit weak, relationship between formal work-related learning and perceived internal employability. No other significant relationships were established. Hence, the relationship between work-related learning and perceived employability might not be as straightforward as generally assumed.

Keywords

perceived employability, work-related learning, structural equation modeling, attribution-based theory of intrapersonal motivation

Employability concerns an individual's chance to find new employment (Forrier & Sels, 2003a), which is deemed critical against the background of increasing job insecurity and the knowledge economy (Brown, Hesketh, & Williams, 2003). Practitioners (De Vries, Gründemann, & Van Vuuren, 2001),

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policy makers (e.g., Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2016), and scholars (e.g., Fleischmann, Koster, & Schippers, 2015) all highlight the critical role of work-related learning in promoting employability. The implicit assumption is that everyone can become employable through learning, and this is a matter of individual responsibility (Forrier, De Cuyper, & Akkermans, 2018): Employees are seen as free agents, who should take control over career-related matters, such as work-related learning, whenever they would want or need to. This view is highly agentic, and it implies that employees' career decisions are fully dependent upon the individuals and their reality (Goller & Harteis, 2017). Hence, the current study approaches employability using perceived employability, which concerns individuals' evaluations of their employment chances (De Cuyper & De Witte, 2008).

Yet, this agentic view might only apply to those who perceive themselves as highly employable and not, or in any case far less, to those who perceive themselves as less employable (Forrier et al., 2018): In particular, less employable individuals may perceive many labor market boundaries. These perceptions may prevent them to exert their agency, or engage in work-related learning, as much as high-perceived employable workers do. This idea is central to the notion of bounded agency, which states that agency is dependent upon the interplay of dispositional and structural boundaries that individuals encounter (Desjardins & Rubenson, 2009). Moreover, given that perceptions are the primary motive for action, perceived employability ensures the individuals' awareness of their employability, which might evoke reactions, such as the engagement (or disengagement) in work-related learning (Katz & Kahn, 1978).

A reciprocal relationship between perceived employability and work-related learning would imply the risk of increasing polarization in the labor market: Those who perceive themselves as employable engage in work-related learning which then promotes their perception of being employable, and vice versa for those who perceive themselves as less employable. So far, reciprocity has not yet attracted much attention (Veld, Semeijn, & Vuuren, 2015), and the relationship from perceived employability to learning has been suggested and demonstrated by Kyndt, Onghena, Smet, and Dochy (2014), yet only cross-sectionally.

Accordingly, our aim is to investigate reciprocity between work-related learning and perceived employability, while conceiving these concepts broadly. In particular, work-related learning is conceptualized using all formal and informal learning activities individuals undertake with regard to their career (Kyndt & Baert, 2013). Formal work-related learning concerns the engagement in learning activities which contain a specific goal, context, support, and time frame (Colley, Hodgkinson, & Malcom, 2003). Informal work-related learning, on the contrary, entails all learning activities that emanate from daily work-related experiences involving *personal sources* (e.g., reflection, asking feedback, observing others) and *environmental sources* (e.g., reading books, surfing the web; Noe, Tews, & Marand, 2013). Perceived employability is conceptualized as individuals' evaluations of their employment chances in both the internal (i.e., within the current organization) and external labor market (i.e., beyond the boundaries of the current organization; De Cuyper & De Witte, 2008).

The aim was achieved using structural equation modeling on three-wave survey data of a diverse sample of Belgian employees in terms of participants' organizational type and demographic characteristics such as age, educational level, and gender. We placed this aim against the background of Weiner's (2000) attribution-based theory of intrapersonal motivation. This theory is, to the best of our knowledge, not yet introduced in employability literature but has particular appeal: It provides an explanation for how actions (e.g., work-related learning) and perceptions (e.g., perceived employability) are related, as it is guided by the idea that people act upon their own personal understanding of themselves and the context they are in (Weiner, 2000).

Theoretical Framework

Attributions involve perceptions of causality that individuals use to make sense of their environment (Weiner, 1976). Attribution theory is often used to predict why *others* behave in a certain manner and

relatively seldom in relation to the self: This relates to differences between interpersonal (e.g., Nishii, Lepak, & Schneider's, 2008, HR attributions) and intrapersonal theories of motivation. Although not a perfect one-to-one match, intrapersonal theories have particular resonance for the purpose of this study because they assume that individuals act upon their own perception.

In particular, the attribution-based theory of intrapersonal motivation (2000) is based on the idea that individuals base their own actions on their perceptions of the causality of previous successes and/or failures (Weiner, 2000). They act in order to continue success (and related positive events and feelings) and to discontinue failures (and related negative events and feelings; Weiner, 2000). Applied to the current study, employees might act to increase perceived employability, as it implies *success*: Perceived employability reflects success in the labor market and brings about positive feelings (e.g., occupational health and well-being; Vanhercke et al., 2015) and events (e.g., job transitions; Nelissen, Forrier, & Verbruggen, 2017).

Attributions are often colored by hedonic biasing: Success, in comparison to failure, is more likely to be internally attributed (Weiner, 2000). If individuals believe that they have control over their successes themselves, they are likely to put in effort to stimulate or maintain them (Weiner, 2000). As such, these behaviors involve expectancies of success. This relates closely to expectancy-value theory (Atkinson, 1957), as these successes motivate people to handle in terms of beneficial outcomes (Weiner, 1985). The implication for this study is that perceived employability is seen as a success, which individuals want to stimulate. They may do so by engaging in work-related learning: Work-related learning, in this sense, is seen as the *effort* that individuals make to stimulate this type of success.

With time, a cycle of reciprocal interactions might establish and the success–effort relation might become unconscious and habitual (Kelley & Michela, 1980). This unconscious and habitual cycle of reciprocal interactions between perceived employability and work-related learning might establish quit early in an individual's career. Indeed, the idea that learning contributes to labor market chances is rooted in the importance that is attached to formal education: Students engage in education to prepare for the labor market. Furthermore, it is often stressed, and empirically supported, that the higher the students' educational degree, the more job opportunities they will receive (and perceive; European Commission, 2014). But also, governments (OECD, 2016) and organizations (De Vries et al., 2001) emphasize the need to learn in order to become employable. This reflects a norm which individuals might internalize quit easily (Weiner, 2000). Only when these implicit attributions are disconfirmed, individuals might consciously consider attributing differently, which may then change their behavior (Weiner, 1985).

Along those lines, people who perceive themselves as less employable might encounter more labor market barriers than those who perceive themselves as highly employable (Desjardins & Rubenson, 2009; Rodrigues, Guest, & Budjanovcanin, 2016). Due to these barriers, they might change their attributions. More specifically, those who perceive themselves as less employable may base their employability perceptions on contextual limits more than on their own talents and skills. This external attribution will affect their behavioral response (Nunez et al., 2005; Oghojafor, Olayemi, Oluwatula, & Okonji, 2012): These individuals might be less likely to engage in work-related learning, as they believe they cannot affect their employability themselves. Similarly, if they engage in work-related learning, their perceived employability might not be affected, as they believe it is withheld by the structural barriers they encounter.

The evidence to date seems to support the idea that work-related learning contributes to success experiences in the form of the perception of being employable. Formal work-related learning promotes perceived internal employability (Nurita, Pa'Wan, Akmar Othman, & Moksini, 2010; Sanders & de Grip, 2004), perceived external employability (Nurita et al., 2010), and more general perceptions of employability (Berntson, Sverke, & Marklund, 2006; Carbery & Garavan, 2005; Panagiotakopoulos, 2011). Informal learning using personal sources contributed to general perceived

employability in the study by Panagiotakopoulos (2011). Other studies provided indirect support using indicators that are related to perceived employability, for example, perceived competences needed to be employable (e.g., Froehlich, Beausaert, & Segers, 2015; Gerken, Beausaert, & Segers, 2016). No studies to date concerned informal learning using environmental sources in relation to perceived employability.

Studies that test the relationship from perceived employability to work-related learning are lacking. Indirect empirical evidence comes from studies that used concepts that are conceptually related to perceived employability (e.g., career attitudes) or work-related learning (e.g., career behavior). For example, career attitudes (i.e., career motivation and orientation) were found to stimulate informal work-related learning (Sanders, Oomens, Blonk, & Hazelzet, 2011; van Rijn, Yang, & Sanders, 2013), and perceived employability was found to stimulate career behavior (i.e., helping behavior in the context of work; De Cuyper et al., 2014).

Accordingly, we formulate the following hypothesis: A positive and reciprocal relationship exists between perceived (internal and external) employability and work-related learning (i.e., formal work-related learning and informal work-related learning using personal and environmental sources).

Method

Procedure and Sample

The data were collected via a Belgian International Organization for Standardization (ISO) certified marketing research company. Wage earners working in different organizations in Belgium were invited per e-mail to participate in an online survey in November 2016 (Wave 1, i.e., T1), May 2017 (Wave 2, i.e., T2), and November 2017 (Wave 3, i.e., T3). At all occasions, the respondents had 1 week to fill out the questionnaire. After the initial invitation, nonrespondents were sent two more reminders (during the first two collections) and one reminder during the last collection. Participation in the study was voluntary. To encourage continued participation, respondents could win a voucher upon completion of each survey with higher chances upon completion of all three surveys. The voucher values ranged from €30 to €250. Before participation, respondents agreed to an informed consent in which they were assured that their identities would be protected, the data would be treated confidentially, and that they could end their participation at any time.

The sample was stratified according to age and educational level. As the panel provider did not have information on the current employment status of their members, 10,291 invitations were sent with the message to only respond if in paid employment at the time. All respondents who were invited to participate at T1 were also invited for the following two surveys. At Time 1, 1,539 respondents started to fill out the questionnaire, of whom 1,373 provided a complete response (i.e., 89%). Numbers at T2 are 1,748 and 1,571 (i.e., 90%) and at T3, 1,145 and 989 (i.e., 86%), respectively. Those who lost employment during one of the following waves were not included in the analysis.

Complete data of 462 respondents were collected. The analyses were based on data from 2,518 respondents who filled out their background characteristics and completed at least one key variable. Including incomplete data offers a more accurate estimation than complete data from a relatively small subset of the sample (Allison, 2003). Respondents' age ranged from 18 to 68 (mean [M] = 39.89; standard deviation [SD] = 12.70). Most respondents were highly educated (International Standard Classification of Education [ISCED] 5–8; bachelor degree or higher; 63%), though a significant share was less educated (ISCED 0–4; below bachelor degree; 37%). Most respondents were female (58%), worked full time (70%) in a permanent employment contract (88%). Those who worked part time (i.e., 30%) worked on average 26 hr per week (SD = 7.25). Of all respondents, 46% worked in the profit sector, 42% worked in nonprofit, and 13% in social profit.

Measures

Perceived employability. Perceived employability was measured using the instrument developed by De Cuyper and De Witte (2008). The instrument includes two scales with good internal consistency, measuring (1) perceived internal employability ($.94 < \alpha < .95$ across the three waves) and (2) perceived external employability ($\alpha = .95$ across all waves). In a previous study, similar reliabilities were found for perceived internal ($\alpha = .92$) and external ($\alpha = .95$) employability (Nelissen et al., 2017). Example items are “I am confident that I could quickly get another job, within my current organization (perceived internal employability), elsewhere (perceived external employability).” Respondents rated the items on a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (*totally disagree*) to 5 (*totally agree*). A past study showed that both perceived internal and external employability related to upward job transitions and perceived internal employability to formal on-the-job training (Nelissen et al., 2017).

Work-related learning. Work-related learning was assessed using the instrument of Grosemans, Smet, Houben, De Cuyper and Kyndt (2019), which includes an extended set of activities individuals undertake with regard to their career. The instrument consists of three scales of work-related learning displaying good internal consistency reliability as measured by Cronbach’s α statistics: (1) formal work-related learning ($.82 < \alpha < .85$ across the three waves), (2) informal work-related learning from personal sources ($.89 < \alpha < .90$ across the three waves), and (3) informal work-related learning from environmental sources ($.79 < \alpha < .83$ across the three waves). In a previous study, similar reliabilities were found: Formal work-related learning ($\alpha = .81$), informal learning from personal sources ($\alpha = .83$), and informal learning from environmental sources ($\alpha = .80$). Example items are during the last 6 months, how many times did you engage in the following activities, with regard to your (future) work: “attended a presentation” (formal work-related learning), “asked the opinion of others about what I did” (informal work-related learning from personal sources), and “paid attention to how others managed things” (informal work-related learning from environmental sources). Answers ranged on a 7-point frequency scale from 1 = *never* to 7 = *on a daily basis*. In a previous study, self-efficacy and work-domain goal orientation have been found to relate to work-related learning (Grosemans, Coertjens, & Kyndt, 2018).

Control variables. As certain groups of individuals perceive more labor market boundaries, accounted for those factors that may discourage them to put in effort (i.e., work-related learning) and to perceive career opportunities (i.e., perceived employability). Research suggests that older (Berntson et al., 2006), less educated (Forrier & Sels, 2003b) women (Andrew, 2009) report lower levels of perceived employability and engage less in work-related learning (*age*: De Lange et al., 2010; *gender*: Knipprath & De Rick, 2014; *education*: Kyndt & Baert, 2013). Age was included as a continuous variable. Educational level was dummy coded in 0 = *less educated individuals* (ISCED 0–4) and 1 = *higher educated individuals* (ISCED 5–8). A binary variable representing gender was also computed.

Analysis Strategy and Fit Indices

In a first part of the analyses, the measurement model was compared with alternative models, multicollinearity and nonnormality were checked, longitudinal measurement invariance was explored, and internal and external validity were investigated. In the second part of the analyses, the hypothesized model was compared with competing models, stationarity was explored, and the reciprocal relations were tested on whether they were of the same magnitudes.

Given that χ^2 tests are sensitive to sample size (Bentler & Bonett, 1980), we followed the recommendations of Chen (2007) to test measurement and time invariance (Preacher, 2015; Vahle-Hinz, Mauno, De Bloom, & Kinnunen, 2017). For testing metric invariance, a change of $\geq -.010$ in comparative fit index (CFI), supplemented by a change of $\geq .015$ in root mean square error of

approximation (RMSEA) or a change of $\geq .030$ in standardized root mean square residual (SRMR) would indicate noninvariance. For testing the other measurement invariance models, a change of $\geq -.010$ in CFI, supplemented by a change of $\geq .015$ in RMSEA or a change of $\geq .010$ in SRMR would indicate noninvariance (Chen, 2007). For time invariance, the latter most strict criteria were adopted. A nonsignificant loss of fit for the more constricted models indicates that longitudinal measurement invariance and time invariance hold.

For testing the hypotheses, bootstrapping (BS = 1,000) with 95% confidence intervals was used, as it offers advantages over traditional approaches (Preacher & Hayes, 2008). For evaluating model fit, CFI, RMSEA, SRMR, and Bayesian information criterion (BIC) were compared with conventional standards (i.e., CFI > .90; RMSEA < .08; SRMR < .09; Weston & Gore, 2006). For BIC, the rule of thumb states “the smaller the value, the better the fit.” For comparing models, difference χ^2 tests were used. A significant χ^2 difference refers to a better fit of the more complex model.

Results

Establishing the Measurement Model

First, the expected measurement model was tested against three competing models using full information maximum likelihood estimation in Mplus 8 software. The expected measurement model (MM1) with 3 factors of work-related learning and 2 factors of perceived employability in three waves (resulting in 15 factors, i.e., 5 at each wave) yielded a good fit to the data ($\chi^2 = 5,067.99$; $df = 1,743$; CFI = .951; RMSEA = .028; SRMR = .041; BIC = 230,134.71). This measurement model provided a better fit compared to three competing models: a 12-factor model (i.e., 4 factors at each wave) in which all perceived employability items loaded on the same factor (MM2), a 12-factor model (i.e., 4 factors at each wave) in which all items of informal work-related learning (from personal sources and from environmental sources) loaded on the same factor (MM3), and a 9-factor model (i.e., 3 factors at each wave) in which all work-related learning factors loaded on the same factor (MM4; see Table 1).

Second, *Ms*, *SDs*, and correlations were computed using IBM SPSS 24.0 software (see Table 2). After rejecting multicollinearity (i.e., correlations higher than $r = .85$) and nonnormality (i.e., skewness index > 3; Kurtosis index > 10; Weston & Gore, 2006), all further analyses were performed using Mplus 8 software and full information maximum likelihood estimation. Longitudinal measurement invariance was then tested. The 15-factor measurement model showed full measurement invariance (i.e., loadings, intercepts, item residual variances, and correlations between item residuals at adjacent waves, fixed across time), which assures that the items were interpreted in the same manner across all time waves (Selenko, Mäkikangas, & Stride, 2017). The change in CFI, RMSEA, and SRMR (i.e., $\Delta CFI = -.001$, $\Delta RMSEA = .000$, $\Delta SRMR = .000$) did not exceed Chen’s (2007) cutoff scores (see Table 1).

Third, the average variance extracted (AVE) scores for each factor from the best fitting measurement model demonstrated internal convergent validity (the factor’s AVE exceeded .5) and external discriminant validity at each wave (the AVE factor exceeded each of the squared correlations with other factors; Fornell & Larcker, 1981), as can be seen in Table 2.

Testing the Hypothesis

The hypotheses were tested by extending the best measurement invariance model by adding the autoregressive paths, the control variables, and the hypothesized paths. The cross-lagged reciprocal paths between work-related learning and perceived employability were estimated longitudinally: From concept X at T1 and T2 to concept Y at T2 and T3, respectively. This hypothesized structural model was then compared to three competing models. In support of our hypothesis, the reciprocal model ($\chi^2 = 6,658.51$; $df = 2,070$; CFI = .933; RMSEA = .030; SRMR = .071; BIC = 229,056.77) fitted the data

Table 1. Model Fit Indices and Model Comparison Tests for Measurement Model and Measurement Invariance.

Model	Specifics	χ^2 (df)	CFI	RMSEA	SRMR	BIC	Δ Model	$\Delta\chi^2$ (Δ df)	Δ CFI	Δ RMSEA	Δ SRMR
Measurement model											
MM1	Hypothesized	5,067.99 (1,743)	.951	.028	.041	230,134.71					
MM2	PE (1 factor)	19,574.01 (1,782)	.736	.063	.122	244,335.31	MM2–MM1	14,506.02 (39)**	–.215	.035	.081
MM3	WRLI (1 factor)	7,840.73 (1,782)	.910	.037	.052	232,602.03	MM3–MM1	2,772.74 (39)**	–.041	.009	.011
MM4	WRL (1 factor)	11,907.55 (1,812)	.850	.047	.070	236,433.92	MM4–MM1	6,839.56 (69)**	–.101	.019	.029
Measurement invariance											
M11	Configural	5,067.99 (1,743)	.951	.028	.041	230,134.71			0	0	0
M12	Metric	5,094.86 (1,775)	.951	.027	.041	229,910.98	M12–M11	26.87 (32)	0	0	0
M13	Scalar	5,141.12 (1,807)	.951	.027	.041	229,706.64	M13–M12	46.26 (32)	0	0	0
M14	Strict	5,240.98 (1,849)	.950	.027	.041	229,477.59	M14–M13	99.86 (42)**	–.001	0	0
M15	Full	5,261.37 (1,870)	.950	.027	.041	229,333.53	M15–M14	20.39 (21)	0	0	0

Note. MM = measurement model; PE = perceived employability; WRL = work-related learning; WRLI = informal learning from personal and environmental sources; M1 = measurement invariance model; CFI = comparative fit index; RMSEA = root mean square error of approximation; SRMR = standardized root mean square residual; BIC = Bayesian information criterion. Boldfaced lines refer to chosen models.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

Table 2. Means, Standard Deviations, AVE Scores, and Intercorrelations for the (Observed) Study Variables.

Variable	M	SD	AVE	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18
1. Age	39.89	12.70		1																	
2. Sex	0.58	0.49		-.21**	1																
3. ISCED	0.63	0.48		-.22**	-.03	1															
4. PEI T1	2.55	1.12	.80	-.19**	-.04	.02	1														
5. PEI T2	2.61	1.11	.80	-.20**	-.01	.02	.72**	1													
6. PEI T3	2.56	1.11	.79	-.20**	-.02	.08	.69**	.76**	1												
7. PEE T1	3.14	1.12	.82	-.40**	-.04	.11*	.30**	.32**	.28**	1											
8. PEE T2	3.12	1.11	.81	-.41**	-.04	.13**	.30**	.32**	.33**	.79**	1										
9. PEE T3	3.12	1.13	.80	-.38**	-.04	.07	.25**	.31**	.29**	.73**	.77**	1									
10. WRLF T1	2.16	0.95	.59	-.11*	-.01	.18**	.26**	.27**	.25**	.11*	.10	.12*	1								
11. WRLF T2	2.15	0.90	.56	-.13**	-.03	.22**	.27**	.28**	.26**	.15**	.21**	.21**	.54**	1							
12. WRLF T3	2.15	0.89	.56	-.14**	-.04	.21**	.16**	.18**	.22**	.13*	.13**	.15**	.47**	.60**	1						
13. WRLP T1	3.81	1.31	.61	-.32**	.13**	.26**	.23**	.22**	.22**	.18**	.19**	.16**	.37**	.21**	.23**	1					
14. WRLP T2	3.78	1.26	.58	-.31**	.11*	.25**	.23**	.24**	.25**	.22**	.23**	.22**	.22**	.43**	.30**	.60**	1				
15. WRLP T3	3.72	1.29	.57	-.33**	.10*	.24**	.19**	.18**	.22**	.16**	.22**	.20**	.22**	.23**	.34**	.62**	.64**	1			
16. WRL E T1	3.31	1.53	.63	-.05	-.02	.31**	.14**	.09*	.13**	.05	.06	.06	.44**	.33**	.34**	.59**	.43**	.38**	1		
17. WRL E T2	3.40	1.46	.61	-.10*	-.14**	.27**	.15**	.08	.16**	.12**	.13**	.13**	.32**	.45**	.35**	.33**	.51**	.37**	.58**	1	
18. WRL E T3	3.33	1.49	.60	-.10*	-.08	.18**	.13**	.04	.10*	.10*	.12**	.14**	.34**	.31**	.41**	.34**	.35**	.47**	.55**	.58**	1

Note. T1 = Time 1; T2 = Time 2; T3 = Time 3; PEI = perceived internal employability; PEE = perceived external employability; WRL = work-related learning; F = formal; P = personal; E = environmental; AVE = average variance extracted.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

better than the model with only cross-lagged paths of work-related learning to perceived employability ($\Delta\chi^2 = 29.26$; $\Delta df = 12$; $p < .01$) and better than the model with only cross-lagged paths of perceived employability to work-related learning ($\Delta\chi^2 = 23.98$; $\Delta df = 12$; $p < .05$). The autoregressive model provided the poorest fit. An overview of the fit indices of all competing models can be found in Table 3.

We then assessed stationarity (i.e., the degree to which the hypothesized paths were time invariant) by testing whether equivalent paths between constructs were stable over time (Preacher, 2015). The model in which all relations were estimated freely ($\chi^2 = 6,658.51$; $df = 2,070$; CFI = .933; RMSEA = .030; SRMR = .071; BIC = 229,056.77) was compared to a model in which equality constraints were imposed on the equivalent paths of the cross-lagged relations. As these constraints did not compromise the model, we demonstrated that the model was stationary (i.e., $\Delta CFI = .000$, $\Delta RMSEA = .000$, $\Delta SRMR = .001$).

Finally, we investigated whether the causal paths of the reciprocal effects were equal to allow a better understanding about the nature of the reciprocal relationship. We found that the time invariant model (Model A) was not compromised when compared with Model B that represented the same model but with equality constraints on all mutual paths of the reciprocal relationship ($\Delta\chi^2 = 5.78$; $\Delta df = 6$; $p > .05$). Thus, this lends further support to a reciprocal relationship, as it suggests that the significant reciprocal effects are of the same magnitudes. However, contrary to expectations, results provide only limited support for our hypothesis that a reciprocal relationship exists between work-related learning and perceived employability. Only one significant reciprocal relationship emerged: For formal work-related learning and perceived internal employability, positive paths of the same magnitude were found (for more details, see Figure 1).

Discussion

The current study set out to probe the reciprocal relationship between perceived employability and work-related learning. It is often assumed that work-related learning stimulates employability, yet (a) potential reciprocity had not yet been addressed, and (b) a broad account of both concepts was missing. We included three types of work-related learning (i.e., formal work-related learning, informal work-related learning from personal sources, and informal work-related learning from environmental sources), and perceived internal and external employability. This aim was achieved through structural equation modeling on three-wave survey data of a diverse sample of Belgian employees in terms of participants' organizational type and demographic characteristics such as age, educational level, and gender. We placed this aim against the background of the attribution-based theory of intrapersonal motivation (Weiner, 2000), which had not yet figured in employability research. Results provided evidence for a reciprocal relationship between formal work-related learning and perceived internal employability, while all other relations were insignificant. We see 3 points that deserve further comment.

First, the reciprocal relationship between formal work-related learning and perceived internal employability aligns with the attribution-based theory of intrapersonal motivation. Both formal work-related learning and perceived internal employability may trigger the attributional process (Weiner, 2000) more than informal work-related learning and perceived external employability do: Formal work-related learning provides a structured and clear image of the learning objective compared to informal work-related learning (Marsick & Watkins, 2001). Hence, it might be easier to attribute an increase in perceived employability to formal work-related learning. Further, as most employees are more familiar with the demands and requirements in the internal labor market, changes in perceived internal employability might be easier to notice than changes in perceived external employability. Thus, the effect of *formal* work-related learning on perceived *internal* employability might be more readily observable, and thus evoke more work-related learning, which would explain the significant

Table 3. Model Fit Indices and Model Comparison Tests for Competing Models, Time Invariance, and Equal Cross-Lagged Effects.

Model	Specifics	χ^2 (df)	CFI	RMSEA	SRMR	BIC	Δ Model	$\Delta\chi^2$ (Δ df)	Δ CFI	Δ RMSEA	Δ SRMR
Competing models											
SMA	Autoregressive	6,713.81 (2,094)	.933	.030	.074	228,924.13					
SMB	WRL $\rightarrow$ PE	6,687.77 (2,082)	.933	.030	.072	228,992.07	SMA-SMB	26.04(12)**	0	0	.002
SMC	PE $\rightarrow$ WRL	6,682.49 (2,082)	.933	.030	.073	228,986.79	SMA-SMC	31.37(12)**	0	0	.001
SMH	Hypothesized	6,658.51 (2,070)	.933	.030	.071	229,056.77	SMB-SMH	29.26 (12)**	0	0	.001
							SMC-SMH	23.98 (12)*	0	0	.002
Time invariance											
TIM0	Free	6,658.51 (2,070)	.933	.030	.071	229,056.77					
TIM1	Fixed	6,707.38 (2,087)	.933	.030	.072	228,972.51	TIM1-TIM0	48.87 (17)**	0	0	.001
Equal cross-lagged effects											
Model A	Reciprocal free	6,707.38 (2,087)	.933	.030	.072	228,972.51					
Model B	Reciprocal equal	6,713.16 (2,093)	.933	.030	.072	228,931.31	SMH2-TIM1	5.78 (6)	0	0	0

Note. SM = structural model; PE = perceived employability; WRL = work-related learning; TIM = time invariance model; CFI = comparative fit index; RMSEA = root mean square error of approximation; SRMR = standardized root mean square residual; BIC = Bayesian information criterion.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

these work-related learning activities than one's external perceived employability. Following the theory, the absence of the attribution that work-related learning stimulates perceived external employability will also change their behavioral response: Perceived external employability might no longer evoke the response of engaging in work-related learning.

Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

Even though this study was set up with great care (e.g., three-wave longitudinal design, employee participation independent from employer, establishment of time invariance), the following limitations and potential routes for future research are recognized.

First, this study demonstrated the importance of the distinction between the different types of work-related learning and the different dimensions of perceived employability, yet an arguable weakness is the absence of specific hypotheses for each relationship. This was due to the fact that there was limited empirical evidence and no theoretical framework available accounting for the specific relations between the different types of work-related learning and employability. However, our introduction of Weiner's (2000) attribution-based theory of intrapersonal motivation in the employability literature may enhance theoretization: We could provide an intuitive explanation for the presence and absence of specific relationships (such as formal work-related learning with perceived internal employability), which we would not be able to achieve using most prominent theories in employability literature. These theories, which are loosely based on theories from other research fields (see Forrier et al., 2018, for a discussion), can only offer a general explanation for why work-related learning could enhance perceived employability (see Becker's, 1975, human capital theory) or why perceived employability could also stimulate work-related learning (see Hobfoll's conservation of resources theory, 1989). However, more research is needed to provide better guidance on whether the attribution-based theory of intrapersonal motivation (2000) would aid research on career-related behavior and perceptions and work-related learning and perceived employability in particular.

Second, we examined the reciprocal relationship between three types of work-related learning and two types of perceived employability and found a significant effect for the relation between formal work-related learning and perceived internal employability. This finding should alert future researchers to take reciprocity into account when addressing the relationship (especially when adopting a cross-sectional design). Moreover, this finding could also motivate researchers to examine potential accumulation effects for this significant and reciprocal relation using latent growth curve analyses. Accumulation implies an increasing gap over time between the higher and lower employable, as described under the heading of the Matthew effect (Forrier et al., 2018).

Third, we acknowledge that our choice to focus upon perceived employability is one out of many other options, though one that is particularly well suited for the purpose of this study. Although perceived employability is subjective in nature, previous studies have shown relationships with objective indicators of employability such as job transitions (Forrier, Verbruggen, & De Cuyper, 2015). However, it would also benefit research to investigate the relation of work-related learning with other employability measures such as job transitions (Nelissen et al., 2017) or employability competences (e.g., Van der Heijde & van der Heijden, 2006). Another, yet related, limitation of this study was the use of self-ratings. However, the use of a data collection which is entirely independent of respondents' organizations provided the benefit of reducing social desirability bias. Future research could supplement self-ratings with company data on work-related learning or other ratings on employability.

Practical Implications

The present study does not only have implications for employability policies (both on a governmental and organizational level) but also for career counseling. First, the relation between work-related

learning and perceived employability seems to be rather weak. This might imply that work-related learning should be supplemented with other employability-stimulating practices, individually or via career counseling (e.g., setting career goals; Bagshaw, 1997), organizationally (e.g., transformational leadership; van der Heijden & Bakker, 2011), and governmentally (e.g., reducing labor market barriers; Hennekam, 2015).

Second, our findings demonstrate that formal work-related learning stimulates perceived internal (but not external) employability. Accordingly, practitioners should be aware of the possibility that work-related learning solely benefits the individual's confidence in the internal labor market. On the one hand, these findings may be beneficial for organizational employability policies as concerns that supporting work-related learning would stimulate turnover due to the enhancement of perceived external employability seem to be ungrounded (Baruch, 2001; De Cuyper & De Witte, 2012). On the other hand, these findings might be less desirable for individuals who wish to increase perceived external employability (for instance, during times of restructuring) as other employability-stimulating practices might be needed to get the desired result.

Third, we were unable to demonstrate that informal learning relates to employees' perceived employability: Accordingly, formal work-related learning should not (yet) make place for informal alternatives in view of enhancing employability perceptions. Despite the costs attached to formal work-related learning and despite the convenience of informal work-related learning (such as the current accessibility of the enormous amount of information on the Internet), it might still be important to pursue more structured ways of learning.

Fourth, organizations and career coaches should bear in mind that a cyclic relation was found between work-related learning and perceived employability. Hence, stimulating one variable might start of a self-maintaining cycle between these concepts. Following Weiner's (2000) attribution theory, career coaches may want to explore and help the employees to reappraise underlying difficulties and perceived labor market boundaries, which might affect their motivation to participate in development activities (Desjardins & Rubenson, 2009; Meyers, 2016).

Conclusion

Returning to the question posed at the beginning of this study, our conclusion is that the relationship between work-related learning and employability might not be as straightforward as originally assumed. In the current study, (a) significant and reciprocal relationships only existed for specific forms (i.e., formal work-related learning and perceived internal employability), (b) reciprocal effects occurred with the same magnitudes, and (c) even for these significant and positive reciprocal relations, the effects were rather weak. Hence, the dominant view in the employability literature needs to be adapted: The current, highly agentic, view might be too optimistic in terms of what can be achieved by the individual, as perceived labor market barriers might hinder employability enhancement.

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