The effect of career competencies on young professionals' perceived employability affected by career shocks

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Abstract

Individuals cannot rely on life time employment at one single company due to the increased flexibility in the labor market (Kinnunen et al., 2011). Therefore, employability becomes important for both young professionals and individual companies, especially for HR-departments (Park et al., 2022). This research investigates the association between career competencies and perceived employability and checks if there exists a moderating effect for positively and negatively valenced career shocks. The Conservation of Resources theory of Hobfoll (2001) is used in this research to explain the effect of career competencies on perceived employability. This is because career competencies can be seen as resources as defined within the Conservation of Resources theory. Futhermore, according to COR a career shock has an effect on the personal resources of an individual which is expected to be positive if an individual experiences a positively valenced career shock and therefore will have a higher perceived employability. In addition to that if an individual experience a negatively valenced career shock, the personal resources will be affected which results in a lower perceived employability. To test the established hypotheses, primary data was gathered through an online survey with 136 respondents, people between 20-35 years of age. The results were not consistent with our expectations, as the outcomes of the statistical analyses found only one significant result, which is the association between career competencies and perceived employability. Futhermore, it was expected that positively or negatively valenced career shocks would have a moderating effect on the association between career competencies and perceived employability, but no significant results were found.

Keywords: Perceived employability, Career Shocks, Career competencies

Preface

Please find in front of you my thesis named: The effect of career competencies on young professionals' perceived employability affected by career shocks. I conducted this research to be able to finish the master Strategic Human Resources Leadership at the Radboud University. I was assigned to the topic major life events. I was happy with this subject as it is really relevant, because I started this thesis during the Corona crisis which can be considered as a major life event. Looking back, I have learned a lot about the topic major life events which aroused my interest throughout the writing process of my thesis. Futhermore I learned a lot about doing research and writing academically which will be help me in my future career. I would like to thank everyone that, each in their own way, contributed to the writing process of my thesis. Firstly, my supervisor Marloes van Engen who provided me with helpful feedback, support and advice during the whole thesis process. Futhermore I like to thank Karen Pak, my other supervisor for her feedback at the begin stage of my thesis. I would also like to thank Sofija Pajic, my second assessor, for providing me with feedback. Lastly, I would like to thank my parents, sister and boyfriend for their unconditionally support and help throughout my thesis.

I hope you enjoy reading!

Lotte de Goeij

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Introduction

The working world in the 21st century keeps changing in ways that demand new perspectives and concepts to comprehend and explain the reconfiguring of employment relationships and careers across the life cycle (Tomlinson et al., 2017). Due to rapidly growing flexibility in the labor market, individuals are not able to rely on working at only one company throughout their working life (Kinnunen et al., 2011). The changing world of work impacts young professionals in a way that they constantly have to evaluate their employment opportunities while building their careers (Blokker et al., 2019). As such, job security and lifetime employment are no longer the norm. Therefore, employability turned into one of the most relevant outcomes of contemporary careers for individuals (Blokker et al., 2019). Employability is defined as the ability to get and retain a job in an organization (Hogan et al., 2013).

The need for individuals to engage in constructing their career to become employable has been elaborately investigated (Presti et al., 2021; Blokker et al., 2019). Researchers remarked that individuals develop and secure their employability early in their careers, because it is the foundation of current and future chances on the labor market (Blokker et al., 2019). In order to establish an early career success in a changing labor market, individuals need to develop career competencies (Blokker et al., 2019). Career competencies can be seen as an individual's self-management of working and learning experiences to support achieving their desired career (Kuijpers et al., 2006). These career competencies can help young professionals to make sense of their own qualities and motivation. In previous studies it has already been established that career competencies are good for young professionals' career progress (Blokker et al., 2019). Concluding career competencies can help to actively increase employability (Presti et al., 2021).

In order to comprehend the contemporary career process better, it is important to involve career shocks. Career shocks are considered to happen unexpectedly which makes it impossible for the individual to anticipate or react proactively (Akkermans et al., 2018). Examples of these events are unexpectedly being fired or a family member passing away (Akkermans et al., 2018). In previous literature it is suggested that the disruption caused by the career shocks can be either positively or negatively valenced (Akkermans et al., 2018). A distinction can be made between positive and negative valenced career shocks, but it is not always clear how the career shock affects the future career of an individual (Seibert et al., 2013). Several studies have confirmed that individuals experience career shocks and that

these shocks possibly significantly change career paths (Akkermans et al., 2018). However, in the current literature there is less knowledge about in what way career shocks impact young professionals (Blokker et al., 2019).

Responding to this research gap, this study aims to answer the following research question: *To what extent are career competencies associated with perceived employability and to what extent can positively or negatively valanced career shocks moderate this association?*

Above mentioned research question is relevant both from practical and a theoretical standpoint. Practically, this research is relevant for young professionals, companies and specifically their HR departments. This is because this research provides information over the effect of career competencies on perceived employability. Furthermore, information is given to HR departments to guide young professionals to improve their employability or protect it against the impact of possible career shocks. It is important to understand the impact of career shocks on young professionals, because recently a possible major career shock happened: the COVID-19 pandemic. This thesis will provide insights in how an individual can enhance their career competencies to be able to limit the impact of a career shock on their perceived employability.

Theoretically, this research responds to the very scarce literature on career shocks and perceived employability (Akkermans et al., 2018; Kinnunen et al., 2011). It is important to assess the role of career shocks among individuals and how positive or negative career shocks impact individuals' perceived employability. Only very limited research is done that looked at the association between career shocks and career outcomes (Ali & Mehreen, 2021).

Furthermore, there are very limited studies focusing on young employees, which is surprising (Akkermans et al., 2014). This is because career shocks can cause a disruption in a short period of time which can have consequences for their future career, health, and well-being (Akkermans et al., 2014). So, this research also reacts to calls for more research on the occurrence and influence of career shocks among specific groups (Rummel et al., 2019).

In addition, due to the increased flexibility of the labor market, employees need to seek career possibilities proactively. Therefore, career competencies are important to successfully manage ones' career. Based on these developments more research should be done regarding the impact of career competencies on perceived employability (Akkermans et al., 2014).

Therefore, this study will contribute to the literature on career shocks by revealing the interplay between events outside of the individuals' control and how young professionals

experience these career shocks (Rummel et al., 2019). In addition, given the changing global and economic world, the occurrence of career shocks can therefore be more frequently. Thus, career shocks are going to play a more important role in careers, making the research of career shocks more important and relevant than ever (Rummel et al., 2019).

Theoretical framework

Perceived employability

Due to the fast changing and unpredictable labor market, being constantly employable has become important (Park et al., 2022). Because of this, secure employment within the same company is no longer ensured. Therefore, employees are likely to manage their careers as employable in the labor market and guide their careers by themselves instead of relying on their employer (Park et al., 2022).

Employability has been studied in multiple disciplines, for example career research and psychology. This results in multiple explanations of the concept employability (Vanhercke et al., 2014). However, the common denominator in these explanations is an employees' ability to find/and or maintain employment (Akkermans & Tims, 2016). Recently scholars have focused on perceived employability, which can be defined as, an employees' perception on their possibilities for a job in the internal and/or external labor market (Vanhercke et al., 2014). Perceived employability is a subjective approach and thus fits the psychological understanding of employability (Vanhercke et al., 2014). This psychological understanding views perceived employability as a personal resource, which supports individuals to deal with feasible stressful events (e.g. a career shock) threatening a persons' job position or employment (Kirves et al., 2017). In addition, individuals' knowledge, skills, social capital and abilities affect the perception of possibilities, thus their perceived employability (Kirves et al., 2017).

Furthermore, perceived employability refers to "obtaining and maintaining" employment. This idea about perceived employability is relevant for several groups on the labor market and during their career path (Vanhercke et al., 2014). Looking at an individuals' career, perceived employability is critical in the stages of exploration of the labor market, strengthening and retaining of the current job and during job change.

Career shocks

Major life events that occur in peoples' lives have an impact on their career path. Often these events happen unexpectedly and it is impossible for the individual to anticipate or react proactively (Akkermans, Seibert & Mol, 2018). Events like this are named career shocks. A career shock is defined as a "disruptive and extraordinary event that is caused by factors outside the focal individual's control and that trigger a deliberate thought process concerning ones' career" (Blokker et al., 2019, p. 173). Career shocks have an impact on the dynamic course of the individuals' career in light of different factors originating from the family, the company, society, the economy and/or the usual environment in which the employee resides (Petrović et al., 2021). In addition, the emergence of a career shock can differ in terms of foreseeability and can be either positively or negatively valenced (Akkermans et al., 2018). A career shock can challenge the understanding of a career as totally self-manageable, containable, or prone to individual crafting (Petrović et al., 2021). A career shock is an event which triggers deliberation involving the possibility of a transformation in career related behavior for example looking for further education, a different job or changing employment status (Seibert et al., 2013)

Another attribute of a career shock is valence. Valence is likely to be related to career outcomes, so that the more positively valenced a career shock is, the more positive the career outcomes of that shock will be, and vice versa (Akkermans et al., 2018). So, a Positive career shocks result in positive feelings that result in a motivational impulse in ones' career, such as promotion and visible success, whereas negative career shocks result in negative feelings, which function as a stress factor in ones' career, such as the sudden departure of mentor and organizational change (Ali et al., 2020).

Concluding, the impact of a career shock can possibly differ according to how an individual perceives that shock. Thus, the impact of a career shock is likely to differ according to how strongly a person experiences that shock, for example, two persons receiving an unexpected promotion may differ significantly in terms of how much they will engage in career deliberation and behavioral change (Akkermans et al., 2018).

Career competencies

Young professionals need to develop career competencies, this is especially important at the start of their careers. Career competencies can have positive long-term effects in terms of career success (Grosemans & de Cuyper, 2021). Career competencies are explained as knowledge, skills and abilities core to career progression which can be affected by an individual (Akkermans et al., 2013). According to Blokker et al. (2019), career competencies

consist of three parts: reflective, communicative and behavioral career competencies. Reflective career competencies refer to an individuals' understanding of one motivation and qualities which consist of reflecting on values, motivations, strengths and weaknesses with regard to ones' career (Blokker et al., 2019). Communicative career competencies refer to being able to effectively communicate in order to increase one's possibilities of career success. This includes establishing and extending a network for career-associated uses and expressing personal knowledge, abilities and skills to the labor market by self-profiling. Behavioral career competencies refer to being able to design ones' career by engaged investigating the environment in terms of employment and career possibilities and to proactively schedule and attain career goals (Blokker et al., 2019). For the purpose of this research, the three parts of career competencies established by Blokker et al. (2019), will be interpreted as one. So, the three parts together form career competencies.

Furthermore, the labor market and consequently also careers have become more uncertain. In such situations, agency and constant investment in career competencies is an important tool to remain employable (Grosemans & de Cuyper, 2021).

Young professionals

A young professional is an individual who is young and has a job (Peacock your talent, 2020). Nowadays, young professionals are also defined as an employee who is young and in whom the employer is willing to invest, highly educated or not (yet). Furthermore, young professional are individuals who just started working or taking the first or second step in their career (peacock your talent, 2020).

Young professionals are a popular category to investigate, but there exists no clear-cut definition. For example, Lewis and Moital (2016) defined a young professional as an individual who has a degree or professional certification and is between 18-35 years old. Based on above information, in this research young professionals will be defined as individuals between the age of 20 and 35 with a job.

Career competencies and perceived employability

Young professionals with well-developed career competencies will have a better idea about their profession self-concept (e.g., motivations and qualities). In addition, career competencies support individuals to investigate different possibilities on the labor market and to exert control over their career, which then increases perceptions of employability (Blokker

et al., 2019)

Career competencies can be seen as resources, as defined within the Conservation of Resources theory (COR) of Hobfoll (2001). Career competencies fit a goal-directed definition: they operate as resources for individuals in achieving career objectives (Grosemans & de Cuyper, 2021). Career competencies are an important tool for increasing employability (Blokker et al., 2019). However, individuals need to actively design their careers, while at the same time actively anticipate on the change and difficulties triggered by the environment. Therefore, it is important to obtain career competencies (resources) (Blokker et al., 2019). Career competencies can be determined as beneficial career resources for career success. If young professionals develop their career competencies well, it supports them to better navigate the contemporary world of employment and improves the development and retaining of their employability (Blokker et al., 2019).

Several studies have found a direct and positive association between young professionals' career competencies and perceived employability (Blokker et al., 2019). Like Berntson et al. (2006) investigated in Sweden, where these researchers investigated whether human capital has an impact on perceived employability. In this research, a positive association was found between human capital and perceived employability (Berntson et al., 2006). Human capital can be seen as a career competency, because both skills and knowledge help to create value for an individuals' career path (Muhumuza & Nangoli, 2019). Futhermore Akkermans and Tims (2016) investigated if career competencies could increase an employees' subjective career success in terms of perceived employability. A positive relationship was found between career competencies, perceived internal employability and external employability (Akkermans & Tims, 2016). A recent study of Presti et al. (2021) looked at graduates' use of career competencies on the level of employability. This research indicated that the career competencies were related to experiencing higher levels of career success and therefor perceiving themselves as more employable. Based on previous studies who found a positively association between career competencies and perceived employability, the following hypothesis will be tested:

Hypothesis:

H1: The career competencies of young professionals are positively associated with perceived employability.

Moderating role of career shocks

Career shocks are unusual events that occur infrequently and differ in manageability and foreseeability, and can be either negatively or positively valenced by the individual (Blokker et al., 2019). COR theory describes how individuals can cope with stress or trauma like a career shock and to manage their career progression. Furthermore, COR describes how individuals can maximize their resource to achieve career success (Hobfoll, 2001). In this research, career shocks play an important role in an individuals' resource quantity and depletion which can impact the perceived employability and level of career competencies (Ali & Mehreen, 2021).

It would seem possible that career shocks can affect this resource accumulation process, either positively or negatively (Akkermans et al., 2018). A career shock can instigate a thought process about ones' career to revaluation the career development process (Blokker et al., 2019). As such, it is expected that positively valenced career shocks accumulates resources and negatively valenced career shocks deplete resources which can have an impact on the individuals self-career development (Ali & Mehreen, 2021).

According to COR theory, people aim to obtain and protect resources, and try to keep and accumulate them overtime, eventually leading to increased individual development (Akkermans et al., 2018). Possessing such personal resources (e.g. career competencies) allows individuals to be more flexible and will in general be able to deal with difficulties they may face during their career better. So, career competencies can change when a career shock occurs in someone's life. Therefore, career shocks can moderate the association between career competencies and perceived employability.

In previous research of Ng and Feldman (2014), using COR theory, researchers found that career obstacles deplete personal resources and negatively affect the individuals' possibility to achieve a higher salary. Furthermore, Blokker et al. (2019) indicate that positive and negative career shocks moderate the indirect relationship between career competencies and perceived external employability via subjective career success. In addition, Blokker et al. (2019) found a weaker relationship when a negative career shock was indicated and stronger when a positive career shock was indicated.

Therefore, it might be the case that the way young professionals' valence their career,

and thereupon assess their possibility on the job market, can variate based on the career shocks they experience (Blokker et al., 2019).

Hypothesis:

H2a: Positively valenced career shocks positively moderate the association between career competencies and perceived employability

H2b: Negatively valenced career shocks negatively moderate the association between career competencies and perceived employability

Figure 1

conceptual model

Methods

Research design

The aim of this research is to investigate the possible association between career competencies and perceived employability with a plausible moderating effect of career shocks. A quantitative study was conducted in order to test if the established hypotheses, shown in the conceptual model (figure 1), are affirmed or not (Field, 2017). The quantitative data was gathered via an online survey (see Appendix 1). To collect as many respondents as necessary convenience sampling was used, by contacting the researchers' personal contacts via social media, like WhatsApp, LinkedIn and Facebook. The researcher personal network was used because the researcher is part of the group young professionals and therefore able to easily connect with them. Data was collected through the online survey in which privacy was ensured. For designing the survey, Qualtrics, an open-source program, was used to gather data via questionnaires in a user-friendly way.

The survey was developed in such a way that participants were guaranteed anonymity. By not asking any personal information such as their name that could identify a person.

Furthermore, the goal of the research was explained, guaranteeing the participants anonymity and beginning the survey with the most 'straightforward' question. This means the survey started by asking the respondents their age and gender. See Appendix 1 for the survey with the questions for this study.

Participants

This research focuses on young professionals. In this research young professionals are defined as individuals with a job and between the age of 20-35 years old. In total, 177 respondents filled in the survey. A data file was made and checked on missing values, double listed participants and if participants fit the required criteria to participate in this research. A total of 136 participants was used for the SPSS analysis. The data consisted of 64 men (47%) and 72 women (53%). The most respondents were between 22-24 and 27-28 years, representative for 54 % of the data. Futhermore 144 respondents (84%) were single and 92 respondents (68%) filled in university as highest level of education. The respondents were employed in jobs like finance (18%), a supportive function (13%) and administration (12%) in sectors like service (32%) and healthcare (12%). 88 respondents (65%) had parents who both worked during their childhood.

Research ethics

Various ethical considerations were taken into account while performing this research. For example, all information provided by the participants were handled with confidentiality (Sekaran and Bougie, 2016). In addition, informed consent by the participants was achieved, as they had to provide permission to use their answers for academic purposes before they were able to start filling in the survey (Sekaran and Bougie, 2016).

Furthermore, the participants were not enforced to answer a question that they did not like to answer (Sekaran and Bougie, 2016). The gathered data was not deformed in any manner by the researcher and analyzed on the researchers' personal laptop. Furthermore, IP addresses were removed from the dataset before performing the analysis. Merely negligible and required adjustments have been made to the data set to be able to accurately analysis it (Sekaran and Bougie, 2016).

Measuring instruments

To be able to assess the construct validity a confirmatory factor analysis was conducted for every variable that was measured with an existing scale. As such, this was done for perceived employability, career shocks and career competencies. Each scale was assessed on their respective Kaiser-Meyer-Oklin (KMO) (> 0.5), communality after extraction (> 0.3), and their eigenvalues (> 1) (Field, 2017). The control variables were excluded from the factor analyses because they are (binary) single item variables.

Career shock: This is the moderator variable within this research and it was measured by using nine items. Participants judged the degree to which each career shock impacted their career on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (have not experienced the event; and thus, had no impact) to 5 (had a large impact). Items were used from Seibert et al. (2013). Like: "loss of a loved one" and "Successful in a new job or project",) (Seibert et al. 2013). Futhermore COVID-19 was used, because Akkermans et al. (2020) proposed that the Covid-19 pandemic was a career shock. Five more career shocks were selected from the research of Pak et al. (2020) change in family composition, the loss of a loved one, sickness and sickness of a loved one.

An exploratory factor analysis (EFA) was conducted to be able to determine the negatively and positively valenced career shocks. Firstly, the Kaiser-Meyer-Oklin (KMO) was checked, which was above the required 0.6 (0.77). Then the Barlett's Tests of Sphericity was checked, which was significant ($p < .01$). Futhermore, all the communalities after extraction were higher than 0.3. The results provided two components that explained 57.91% of the variance. The eigenvalues were above 1 and the scree plot also showed two components. Based on the research (Akkermans et al. (2020); Seibert et al. 2013; Pak et al. (2020) it was expected that the following career shocks would be positively valenced career shocks: Being successful in a new job/project, change in family composition and receiving promotion/ more responsibility. In addition, the following career shocks would be expected to be negatively valenced career shocks: departure mentor/colleague, loss of a loved one, being sick, sickness of a loved one, receiving promotion/ more responsibility and COVID-19. However, a exploratory factor analyses was conducted. This showed two components, one with the negatively valenced career shocks and the other with the positively valenced career shocks (see Appendix 2). Resulting in the career shocks: successful in a new job/project and receiving promotion/ more responsibility defined as positive valenced career shocks. The other items will be defined as negatively valenced career shocks. Unexpectedly the variable

change of family composition is evaluated as a negatively valenced career shock shown in the factor analysis. It was expected that this item was a positively valenced career shock, however the respondents experienced it as a negatively valenced career shock and therefore it will be included it in this research as a negatively valenced career shock.

Lastly, the reliability was checked, the positively valenced career shocks only consist of two items, which correlate with a Cronbach's Alpha of .663. The negative valenced career shocks Cronbach's Alpha was .836 this means that there exists a good internal consistency of the scale.

Perceived employability: This is the dependent variable within this research and it was measured by using four items from De Witte (1992). Respondents had to rate their employability with the following items: "I am confident that I could quickly get another job", "I could easily find another job, if I wanted to", "I am optimistic that I would find another job, if I looked for one", and "I will easily find another job if I lose this job" ranging on a scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree) (De Witte, 1992).

A confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was performed. Firstly, the the Kaiser-Meyer-Oklin (KMO) was checked, which was above the required 0.6 (0.84), Then the Barlett's Tests of Sphericity was checked, which was significant ($p < .01$). Futhermore, all the communalities after extraction were higher than 0.3. The results provided one component that explained 79.72% of the variance. The eigenvalue was above 1 and the scree plot also showed one component. Lastly, we checked the reliability with the Cronbach's Alpha of the subscale (perceived employability) which was 0.91. This shows that there exists a good internal consistency of the scale.

Career competencies: This is the moderator variable within this research and it was measured by using the 21-item Career Competencies Questionnaire (Akkermans et al., 2013). 2009) dived over six subscales. The answers were assessed on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (Strongly disagree) to 5 (Strongly agree). For example, Reflective career competencies (e.g., "I know what is important to me in my career", α =x), communicative career competencies (e.g., "I know how to ask for advice from person in my network", α = x), and behavioral career competencies (e.g., "I know how to search for developments in my area of work", α =x) were each evaluated with seven items (Akkermans et al., 2013).

A confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was conducted. Firstly, the Kaiser-Meyer-Oklin (KMO) was checked, which was above the required 0.6 (0.864). Then the Barlett's Test of Sphericity was checked which was significant ($p < .01$). Futhermore, all the communalities after extraction were higher than 0.3. The result provided five components that explained

65.86% of the variance which is one less than the six factors used based on the originally scale. The eigenvalues were above 1 and the scree plot also showed five components. These components showed the subcategories of the career competencies. Lastly, the reliability was checked with Cronbach's Alpha of the subscale (career competencies) which was 0.922. This shows that there exists a good internal consistency of the scale. It was decided to keep the original scale and the associated items for the purpose of this research because it is a confirmed scale. Despite the fact that it was known that it does not fully correlate with the original validated scale. Therefore, it still was decided to keep it as one scale.

Control variable:

The control variables were added to see if there exist spurious relations which influence the relationship of the presented conceptual model. According to Grimland et al. (2012) the control variables age, gender and level of education can influence career success in several ways. Furthermore, the control variables: relation status, housing situation, years of work experience in total and at the current employer, level of education, function level, role as manager and branch were also added based on previous research (Cifre et al., 2018; Blokker et al., 2019).

Analysis

For analyzing the collected data, SPSS was used. Firstly, the dataset had to be prepared for analyses by checking for missing values, outliers or duplication. For each variable the missing data was below the 10 -15% norm, so there were no issues for this requirement. (Field, 2017). Furthermore, there were no outliers found in the data.

A regression analysis was conducted to be able to test the direct relation between career shocks and perceived employability. Moreover, a regression analysis was conducted to check if career competences affect the relation between career shocks and perceived employability.

Results

Descriptive statistics

In Table 1 the mean, standard deviations and the correlation of the variables of this research are shown. For the purpose of this research a spearman correlation matrix was conducted to be able to define if there exists a connection between the variables and the

control variables. Based on Table 1, nine significant correlations were found between the variables in this research ($p< 0.05$). This indicates that there exists statistical association between the variables (Field, 2017). Looking at the first column, a significant correlation can be found which implies that negatively valenced career shocks significantly positively correlate with positively valenced career shocks ($r= .37$, $p < .01$) and level of education ($r= .21$, $p < .05$). This means that the higher the respondent scored on level of education or positively valenced career shocks the higher the respondents scored on negatively valenced career shocks.

Looking at the second column, a significant correlation can be found where career competencies significantly positively correlate with perceived employability ($r= .56$, $p < .01$). This means that the higher the respondent scored on perceived employability the higher the respondents' career competencies.

Looking at the third column, a significant correlation can be found where significantly positively valenced career shocks positively correlate with age ($r= .23$, $p < .01$). This means that the older the respondent, the higher the score on positively valenced career shocks.

Looking at the fourth column, a significant correlation can be found where perceived employability significantly negatively correlate with level of education ($r= -.19$, $p < .05$). This means that the lower the level of education of the respondent the lower the perceived employability.

Among the control variables, looking at the fifth column, a significant correlation can be found where age significantly positively correlate with work experience ($r= .71$, $p < .01$) work experience at current employer ($r= .51$, $p < .01$) and level of education ($r= -.19$, $p < .05$). This means that the higher the respondent scored on work experience or on work experience at current employer, or on level of education, the higher the respondents' age.

Looking at the sixth column, a significant correlation can be found where work experience significantly positively correlates with work experience at current employer ($r= .58$, $p < .01$) and level of education ($r= .25$, $p < .01$). This means that the higher the respondent scored on work experience at the current employer or on education level, the higher the respondents' work experience.

Looking at the seventh column, a significant correlation can be found where age significantly positively correlates with level of education ($r= .27$, $p < .01$). This means that the higher the respondent scored on level of education, the higher the respondents' work experience at the current employer.

As a result of the spearman correlation matrix it was decided to only keep the control

variables level of education and age because these variables significantly correlated with the variables of this research.

Table 1
Descriptive statistics and correlations

	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1.Negatively valenced career shock	2.64	1							
2.Career competencies	3.75	.49	.069						
3. Positively valenced career shock	2.70	.96	**.371****	.183					
4.Perceived employability	4.06	.78	-.093	**.562****	-.069				
Control variable									
5. Age	26.5	4.44	.068	.133	**.229****	**.**118			
6. Work experience	6.70	4.62	.074	.094	.147	.123	**.709****		
7. Work experience at current employer	3.50	3.63	.097	.028	.038	-.044	**.513****	**.584****	
8. Level of education	2.11	.49	**.208***	-.058	**.**124	**-.189***	**.193***	**.249****	**.271****

** p < 0.01 level (2 tailed); * p < .05;

N = 136

Ancova

The ordinal variables gender, relation status, housing situation, function level, role as manager and branch were tested with an ANCOVA to be able to determine if they have an influence on the used variables. The result of the ANCOVA indicated that none of the ordinal control variables were significant correlated with one of the variables of this research.

Hypotheses testing

Firstly, hypothesis H1: The career competencies of young professionals are expected to positively associated with perceived employability. This hypothesis was tested with a regression analysis to see if career competencies are positively associated with perceived employability. When investigating this direct effect, a significant effect was found for career competencies (b = .83, p < .001). The direct effect is positive and therefore in line with the established hypotheses. To conclude, career competencies have a positive effect on perceived

employability. Additionally, the control variable level of education is significant (b = -.189, p = .003) and has a negative effect on the relationship of career competencies and perceived employability. So, people with a higher level of education have a lower level of employability.

Table 2
Results regression analysis

Coefficients[a]	B	t	sig
Career competencies	.823	7.104	<.001
Level of education	-.189	-2.990	.003
Age	.014	1.042	.300

a. Dependent Variable: perceived employability

To test the second hypothesis of this research the SPSS add-on macro PROCESS was used. This was used to support the investigation of the moderator effect (Field, 2017). The result of the moderation analyses are described in Table 3. In all the analyses the control variables are included.

Positively valenced career shock

Hypothesis 2a suggests that the relation between career competencies and perceived employability will be positively moderated, when an individual experienced a positively valenced career shock. The outcome of the investigation of the moderator effect is presented in Table 3.

Table 3 shows that by adding the direct effect of a positively valenced career shock on perceived employability was negative and insignificant (b = -.00, p = .99) and the interaction term (career competencies x positively valenced career shock; (b = -.05, p = .70), the moderation effect does not result in a significant change in explaining the variance in perceived employability. Thus, hypothesis 2a cannot be validated.

Negatively valenced career shock

Hypothesis 2b suggests that the relation between career competencies and perceived employability will be negatively moderated, when an individual experiences a negatively valenced career shock. The outcome of the investigation of the moderator effect is presented in Table 3.

Table 3 shows that by adding the direct effect of negatively valenced career shocks on perceived employability was negative and insignificant (b = -.47, p = .32) and the interaction term (career competencies x negatively valenced career shocks; (b = .10, p = .41), the moderation effect does not result in a significant change in explaining the variance in perceived employability. Thus, hypothesis 2b cannot be validated.

The effect of the control variable age is insignificant for hypotheses 2a and 2b. The effect of the control variable level of education is for hypothesis 2a is insignificant, and for hypothesis 2b negative and significant (b = -.172, p <.01). Meaning that level of education is negatively associated with perceived employability.

Table 3
Results for moderator analysis with moderator positively valenced and negatively valenced career shock

Outcome:							
Model summary	**R2**	**F**	***p***	**Model summary**	**R2**	**F**	***p***
	.483	16.742	**.000**		.407	14.713	**.000**
Predictor variable	***b***	**SE**	***p***	**Predictor variable**	***b***	**SE**	***p***
Positively valenced career shock	-.001	.454	.999	Negatively valenced career shock	-.468	.470	.320
Career competencies	1.057	.354	**.004**	Career competencies	.605	.339	**.**077
Career competencies x positively valenced career shock	-0.047	.119	.692	Career competencies x negatively valenced career shock	.098	.120	.414
Age	.019	.013	.156	Age	.009	.013	.480
Level of education	-.162	.065	.055	Level of education	-.172	.063	**.007**

N = 114

Additional analyses

The results of the regression analysis, which disconfirmed hypotheses 2a and 2b, have led to this additional paragraph to investigate if the individuals' career shock could be a possible moderator for the association between career competencies and perceived

employability.

As shown in Table 3, tests were done to see if positively or negatively valenced career shocks moderate the relation between career competencies and perceived employability. The interaction effects are insignificant; which means that there is no moderator effect for positively or negatively valenced career shocks. However, in this additional analysis it is checked if there possibly are significant results for the individuals' career shocks. All career shocks were used separately as moderator, but no interaction term was significant. Therefore, it can be concluded that the individual career shocks had no moderator effect on the association between career competencies and perceived employability.

Discussion and Conclusion

This study was conducted to investigate if career competencies have an impact on the perceived employability of young professionals and to see if there exists a moderating effect for positively and negatively valenced career shocks in above described relationship. Nowadays, individuals need to actively design their careers, while at the same time actively anticipate on the change and difficulties triggered by the environment. Several studies denote that career competencies are beneficial for young professionals' career progress because it can enhance their employability (Blokker et al., 2019). A career shock can have an impact on an individuals' career path but the literature on career shocks is still limited (Akkermans et al., 2018). Therefore, the following research question was studied:

To what extent are career competencies associated with perceived employability and to what extent can positively or negatively valanced career shocks moderate this association?

In this research evidence was found for the positive association between career competencies and perceived employability. Furthermore, it was indicated that the level of education had a negative effect on this relationship. So, people with a higher level of education have a lower level of perceived employability.

However, the moderator effect of positively or negatively valenced career shocks was not found. This can possibly be explained by a persons' personality. Previous research indicates that certain personality characteristics may explain why some people react and adapt differently to life events (e.g. career shocks) (Bonanno, 2004). Perceptions of a career shock may interact with the personality of an individual and influence the impact of it (Rakhshani et al., 2021). Since career shocks are complex events and everyone perceives it differently. Futhermore, personality plausibly affect how individuals react and adapt once a career shock

takes place (Rakhshani et al., 2021). So, the personality of the respondents could explain why there was no change in level of perceived employability. As the respondents were possibly able to quickly adjust to the changing context caused by a career shock due to their personality.

Another explanation of finding no moderator effect could be find in the Conservation of Recourse theory (Hobfoll, 1989). This theory is based on the principle that individuals are motivated to protect their current resources and obtain new resources (Halbesleben et al., 2014). Resource conservation has particular resonance when resources are threated or in circumstance of real loss. In such particular circumstances, individuals invest in resource with the aim to protect current resources and maintain optimal functioning (Grosemans & de Cuyper, 2021). So, it might be the case that there is no moderator effect for the positively or negatively valenced career shocks because; 1) individuals had a high level of personal resources that protected them beforehand of the career shock, 2) the resources were protected by the individual during a career shock and so the impact on the perceived employability was limited, 3) the individual obtained new resources to protect against the impact of the career shock.

Limitations

Limitations and directions for future research

This research has some limitations which will be discussed in this chapter. Firstly, the concept employability is quite new and under researched. It might be interesting to conduct a qualitative research to be able to ask individuals how they experience a career shock and get a more elaborate insight than with a survey. Moreover, the investigated age group can be a limitation since they possibly have experienced less career shocks due to their age as limiting factor. This could have an effect on the results. As such, it is recommended for future research to compare a group with young professionals who didn't experience a career shock and who did experience a career shock. Consequently, there is no possibility that one group will dominate in the dataset.

Another limitation is the lack of a validated measurement instrument for career shocks. For this research Seibert et al. (2013) and Pak et al. (2020) were used to measure career shocks. Consequently, the validity is affected which means that the items which measured career shocks possibly not accurately measure what is intended to measure. Which means that it is not possible to draw a true conclusion and if the research is repeated the same

result will probably not emerge.

In research it already has been argued that it is required to develop a valid measurement instrument for career shocks. Developing a typology of career chocks and it characteristics to be able to create a rather independent operationalization of these shocks could help (Akkermans et al., 2018). This would help researchers to measure the different characteristics of career shocks accurately and to investigate them together without losing unique difference when adding it all up into one general scale (Akkermans et al., 2018). This will give important new perspectives in future research (Blokker et al., 2019).

Finally, Holtom et al. (2005) have introduced that positively and negatively valenced career shocks may combine to form a neutral composite. This would point out that a career shock should not be investigated in isolation, but preferably look at a set of career shocks in future research to be able to look at their total impact on career outcomes (Akkermans et al., 2018).

Practical implications

The outcomes of this research have practical implications for young professionals, firms and their HR employees. This research indicated that career competencies have a positive impact on the perceived employability. Therefore, a recommendation for individuals is to proactively develop their career competencies as this will enhance their perceived employability (Akkermans and Tims, 2016). Individuals can develop their resources by performing and function at their best within a job, to improve the possibility to obtain a new job and to develop themselves during their career (Peeters et al., 2017).

A recommendation for the HR departments is to look at employees' career competencies. Since these have a positive impact on the employability of employees, it is desirable for both the employer as well as the employee. The employer could offer support to enhance the career competencies by providing feedback, offering mentors for support and offering training and development opportunities to improve individual employability (Clarke, 2008).

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Conclusion

This research investigated if an association exists between career competencies and perceived employability, and studied the moderation effect of positively and negatively valenced career shocks. In this research, a positive association was found between career competencies and perceived employability. However, there was an absence of significant

effects for the moderators positively valenced and negatively valenced career shocks. Even though this research showed a lack of significant results, it is still valuable because it investigated an under researched topic, both career shocks and perceived employability. Due to the fast-changing work environment it is remains very relevant to investigate the relation between career competencies and employability considering a possible effect of career shocks.

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Appendix

1. **Survey questions**

Introduction questions

1. What is your gender?
2. How old are you?
3. What is your relationship status?
4. What is your living situation?
5. What is your highest educational level
6. How many years works experience do you have?
7. How many years do you work at your current employer?
8. What is your current function?
9. Are you a manager?
10. Did your both parents had a job during your childhood?
11. In what sector do you work?

Perceived employability (De Witte, 1992).

1. I am confident that I could quickly get another job
2. I could easily find another job, if I wanted to
3. I am optimistic that I would find another job, if I looked for one
4. I will easily find another job if I lose this job

Career competencies (Akkermans et al., 2013).

Reflection on motivation

I know what I like in my work

I know what is important to me in my career

I can clearly see what my passions are in my work

Reflection on qualities

I know my strengths in my work

I am familiar with my shortcomings in my work

I am aware of my talents in my work

I know which skills I possess

Networking

I know a lot of people within my work who can help me with my career

I know a lot of people outside of my work who can help me with my career

I know how to ask for advice from people in my network

I am able to approach the right persons to help me with my career

Self-profiling

I can clearly show others what my strengths are in my work

I am able to show others what I want to achieve in my career

I can show the people around me what is important to me in my work

Exploration

I know how to find out what my options are for becoming further educated

I know how to search for developments in my area of work

I am able to explore my possibilities on the labor market

Career control

I can make clear career plans

I know what I want to have achieved in my career a year from now

I can create a layout for what I want to achieve.in my career

I am able to set goals for myself that I want to achieve in my career

Career shocks (Seibert et al., 2013; Akkermans et al., 2020; Pak et al., 2020)

1. Had a mentor or colleague that was important to you leave the company.

2. Your organization went through a significant negative event such as a reduction-in-workforce, bankruptcy, or major ethical scandal.

3. Succeeded in a new job or visible project that initially challenged you in new and significant ways.

4. Received a pay raise, promotion, or desirable increase in responsibility sooner than expected.

5. experienced a loss of a loved one

6. COVID-19

7. sickness

8. sickness of loved ones or family

9. change in family composition (e.g. childbirth) (positive)

2. Correlation matrix

Rotated Component Matrix[a]

	Component	
	1	2
Departure mentor/colleague	.553	.297
Being Successful in a new job/project	-.009	.864
Loss of a loved one	.785	.256

Being sick	.751	-.169
Sickness of a loved one	.799	-.120
Change in family composition	.694	.310
COVID-19	.553	-.080
Receiving promotion/ more responsibility	.081	.795
Employer experienced a negatively valenced event.	.750	.229

Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis.
Rotation Method: Varimax with Kaiser Normalization.