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Employability, Mobility and Work-Life Balance: How do they relate for MBA holders in Malaysia?

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ABSTRACT

Organisation-managed traditional career is paving the way for what is known as the new career which is self-managed. It is also known as boundaryless, protean or post-corporate career. For the former, the ultimate goal of employees was to climb the proverbial hierarchical ladder up to its highest rung. This then would spell success, which was measured by upward mobility and high income levels of the employees. For the latter, however, success encompassed being employed and remaining employable in the external and internal labour markets. Success in the new career is measured by employability, multi-directional mobility and work-life balance. The trend towards achieving success in career is summarised as gaining employability, making lateral transitions for enrichment and achieving a better and richer quality of life. This study examined the relationship between employability, mobility and work-life balance among 152 MBA graduates in Malaysia. A model that was developed was tested using the Structural Equation Modelling (SEM) technique using Partial Least Squares (PLS). A positive relationship was found between employability and mobility and this relationship was stronger when work-life balance was higher. Hence, organisations should realise the high importance placed by individuals on work-life balance and would need to draw up policies and procedures to enhance this balance among the employees, including changing their inflexible corporate policies to allow for more adaptability and flexibility. The changes could include flexible work schedules, compressed work-week, job-sharing and other workplace arrangements.

INTRODUCTION

Employee turnover rate in Malaysia increased from 12.3% in 2012 to 13.2% in 2013, and was seen mostly in the manufacturing (24%), conglomerates (14%) and financial services (13.3%) industries (Seah, 2013). A survey conducted between June 2010 and July 2011 on executive positions in 143 Malaysian companies across various sectors found an attrition rate between 9.6% and 75% (Goh, 2013). This trend of increasing turnover is in contrast with the traditional career which was organisation-managed and had job security as its hallmark. In the traditional career model, the ultimate goal of employees was to climb the proverbial hierarchical ladder up to its highest rung. This then would spell success which was measured by upward mobility and high income levels of the employees (London & Stumpf, 1982).

Judging on the changes that are currently seen in the world of work, the traditional career seems to be paving the way for what is known as the new career that is also known as boundaryless, protean or post-corporate career (Arthur & Rousseau, 1996; Briscoe & Hall, 2006). Organisations worldwide are restructuring, de-layering and flattening their structures causing the focus of career to shift to self-managed career development (Hall, 2002; Sewell, 2005). Unlike traditional careers, for employees, success in the new career would encompass being employed and remaining employable in the external and internal labour markets (Bernston et al., 2006). Career success

is equally pertinent for organisations as their accomplishment also depends on employees' success (Ng et al., 2005).

Evidences of change are obvious in the financial and construction sectors in Malaysia (Arshad et al., 2005; Juhary et al., 2004). A study on Multinational Corporations (MNCs) in Malaysia showed that organisational changes like downsizing, globalisation and entry of China into the World Trade Organization (WTO) have put pressure on Malaysian industries. Inevitably, these changes in the organisations impact on employability, mobility and work-life balance of the employees.

Employability is increasingly used as an indicator of success as multiple-employer and multiple-profession careers become more common (Boudreau et al., 2001). Employability is also closely linked with mobility as movements between employers are linked to being successful. In fact, employability facilitates mobility and contributes to an individual's "movement capital" (Trevor, 2001).

Mobility can occur in many forms. It can be in the form of renegotiation of contract by leveraging highly marketable skills (Yamashita & Uenoyama, 2006), an increase in responsibilities and opportunities for new learning (Weick, 1996), and intra-organisational, as well as inter-organisational mobility (Valcour & Tolbert, 2003). When individuals move from one employer to another, it does not necessarily mean an advance in position, as what individuals might experience could be an increase in responsibilities, affirmations from peers

and opportunities for new learning (Weick, 1996).

Since the late 1980s, high importance has been placed on autonomy, flexibility and balance between work and home. The protean career theory introduced by Hall (1996) highlights the shift away from organisation managed careers to self or individual career management. The protean career theory focuses on how employees are more inclined to set their own career agenda up and establish benchmarks in measuring career success (Wong & Roziah, 2014). This trend towards achieving success in career is summarised as:

> *"....achieving a multi-level set of self-development targets; gaining employability; making lateral transitions for enrichment…; undertaking self-management and entrepreneurship…; and achieving a better and richer quality of life…"* (Baruch, 2004, p. 76)

Hence, in any discussion on career which includes employability and mobility, work-life balance cannot be left out as the division between work life and personal life is increasingly blurring (Eaton & Bailyn, 2000; Goffee & Jones, 2000). In fact, work-life balance has been highlighted as one of the most important measures of career success by both men and women in Malaysia (Adida & Zainal, 2007). However, despite its importance, the relationship between the three variables has not been empirically studied. In particular, the present study

seeks to determine the relationship between employability and mobility, and explore the impacts of work-life balance on such relationship. In filling the gap, the present study contributes to the existing literature on career development and change.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND PROPOSED RESEARCH MODEL

Employability began to be studied empirically in the 1990s (van der Heijden, 2002). Employability is defined as the ability to gain and maintain a job in a formal organisation (Fugate *et al*., 2004). It is understood as the ability to keep the job one has and to get the job one deserves (Rothwell & Arnold, 2007; De Cuyper & De Witte, 2010). It is seen as an alternative to job security, not only useful for entry into the labour market but to ensure career possibilities within and beyond the borders of organisations. Employability is accepted as a construct with two related components. Its measure includes self-valuation and perceived value both in the current organisation and outside (Rothwell & Arnold, 2007). Employability concerns with how well the employees expect to be able to deal with a number of circumstances that may present themselves in the present or the future, whether positive (e.g., promotions, selection processes) or negative (e.g., redundancy, downsizing) (Rothwell & Arnold, 2007). Employability is contended to enhance an individual's likelihood of gaining employment as it is built upon a number of attributes which include knowledge and skills, capacity for

learning, mastery of career management and job search and professional knowledge (van der Heijde & van der Heijden, 2006; Rothwell & Arnold, 2007).

Employability has a person-centred emphasis which places the responsibility for career management and development on the employees themselves (Hall & Mirvis, 1995). The onus then is on the employees to take the initiative to update their current skills and learn new ones to remain employable (Lee *et al*., 2003).

Increasing job insecurity and changes in employment contract and structure have also increased movement between jobs among employees. The traditional career trajectory of internal promotion based on seniority within a firm has been replaced by 'a sequence of job opportunities that goes beyond the boundaries of any single employment setting' (DeFillippi & Arthur, 1996, p. 116). Boundaryless careers are characterised by mobility not only across organisations but also across occupations, industries, geographic locations and employment forms in a non-linear and unpredictable manner (Arthur *et al*., 1999). The high turnover and attrition rates in Malaysia are proof of employees moving across industries in search for autonomy, challenges and balance. Careers are thus seen as evolving sequences of work experiences over time (Arthur *et al*., 1989), which makes every move from one position to another considered as a career transition (Chudzikowski, 2012). As job security and promotional opportunities within larger organisations decline, individuals may view multiple employer experiences in a positive light because they support skill development, increase marketability, shift career control to the employee, and perhaps result in better matching career and family life-cycle demands (Marler *et al*., 2002).

A person with a boundaryless mindset is said to "enact a career characterized by physical and psychological movement" (Sullivan & Arthur, 2006, p. 9). Mobility will hence be measured based on the attitude employees hold towards initiating and pursuing work-related relationships across organisational boundaries (Briscoe *et al*., 2006).

However, to move from one position to another or from one industry to another, an employee needs to be employable. Hence, there is a relationship between employability and mobility because the higher the employability is, the higher the chances for making intra or inter-organisational movements (Raemdonck *et al*., 2012; Rosenberg *et al*., 2012). Hence, it is hypothesised that:

Hypothesis 1

The higher the perceived employability of an employee, the higher the perceived mobility.

One of the main reasons given by employees who move from job to job is the need to look for balance in their lives, a balance between work, personal time and family time (Goh, 2013). An employee perceives he has a work-life balance when multiple domains of personal time, family care, and work are maintained and integrated

with a minimum of role conflict (Clark, 2001; Ungerson & Yeandle, 2005).

When an individual has a high level of employability, he/she is able to keep his/her job and/or get another one he/she desires (Rothwell & Arnold, 2007). However, as work-life balance is an important concern for most employees, this could explain why some employees do not move to another job/organisation even if they are highly employable. In other words, if the current position and organisation offer the individual the flexibility and balance he/she desires, he/she will not move to another position or organisation although he/she is highly employable. Hence, it can be hypothesised that employees' disposition to move to another job or position is very much linked with work-life balance (Direnzo *et al*., 2015; Hobson, 2011; Lambert & Kossek, 2005).

Hypothesis 2

The positive relationship between employability and mobility will be stronger when work-life balance is higher.

The proposed framework is shown in Fig.1.

METHOD

Sample

One hundred and fifty two MBA graduates holders, with a minimum of three years working experience, were identified as the participants. By attaining the MBA degree, they were assumed to demonstrate some degree of career self management (King, 2003). The MBA graduates were currently employed in manufacturing or service companies across Malaysia.

The participants were drawn from companies/organisations that were randomly selected from the Malaysian Top 1000 Corporate Directory 2004/2005 and the FMM Directory 2007. The researcher wrote and made phone calls to the management of the selected companies to enquire about the availability of MBA holders there. After explaining the purpose of the study and gaining approval, questionnaires were sent to the HR department. Completed questionnaires were returned in an addressed envelope attached. The participants were given two weeks to respond. One hundred and eighty five organisations were selected but only 130 organisations participated (70.3%). Some organisations had more than one MBA holder; hence, the total number
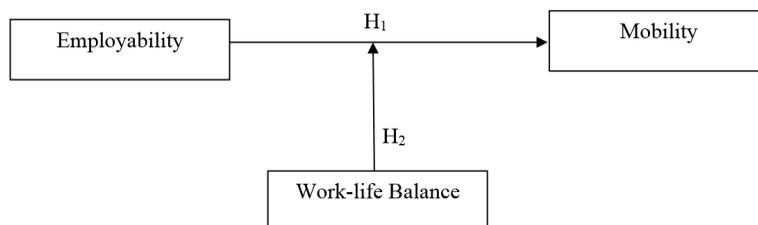

Fig.1: Proposed framework
(Direnzo *et al*., 2015; Hobson, 2011; Raemdonck *et al*., 2012; Rosenberg *et al*., 2012)

TABLE 1
Demographic Profile of the Participants (N=152)

Demographic Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage
Sex	Male	77	50.7
	Female	75	49.3
Year obtained MBA	1990 and earlier	8	5.3
	1991-1995	7	4.6
	1996-2000	47	30.9
	2001-2005	90	59.2
MBA source	Local	94	61.8
	Overseas	35	23.0
	Twinning programme	19	12.5
	Others (e.g., Distance Learning)	4	2.6
Marital status	Married	108	71.1
	Single	42	27.6
	Widowed	2	1.3
Children	Yes	94	61.8
	No	16	10.5
	Not applicable	42	27.6
Sectors	Manufacturing	84	55.3
	Service	68	44.7
Description of Positions in Current Organisation	Strategic decision making	11	7.2
	Senior management responsibility		
	Responsibility for work of others and organizational influence	36	23.7
	First line management		
	Operational	40	26.3
	Others	33	21.7
		24	15.8
		8	5.3

Employees' profile (*N*=152)	M	SD	Minimum	Maximum
Age (in years)	38.5	6.3	29	58
Current job tenure (in years)	7.4	6.0	1	30

of questionnaires received and analyzed was 152. Table 1 shows the profile of the participants.

Measures

The measures used in the questionnaire were based on research in the area of employability, mobility and work-life balance (King, 2003; Briscoe & Hall, 2006;

Rothwell & Arnold, 2007). A seven-point Likert scale was used for all items ranging from '1' "strongly disagree" to '7' "strongly agree".

'Employability' was measured using Rothwell and Arnold (2007). Two dimensions were considered. They were personal attributes (self-valuation) (4 items with reliability of 0.72) and occupational attributes (perceived value of the occupation) (7 items with reliability of 0.79).

Meanwhile, mobility was measured using Briscoe and Hall's (2006) Boundaryless Mindset Scale (8 items with reliability of 0.87). Work-life balance was measured by 6 items adopted from King's (2003) instrument (6 items with reliability of 0.75). Table 2 shows an example of the items used and their sources.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The response bias analysis or the non-response bias check was carried out to ascertain the representativeness of the responses received from the participants. For this purpose, an independent t-test was conducted to determine if there was any significant difference between the means of the responses received within the time period, with the means of the late responses (Armstrong & Overton, 1977). Nonetheless, no response bias was noted in the analyses.

To test the model we developed for this research, we used the structural equation modelling (SEM) technique using partial least squares (PLS) with SmartPLS 2.0 (Ringle *et al*., 2005) software. SmartPLS is a second-generation analysis software that can be used to test a complex model with latent variables. We followed the recommended two-stage analytical procedures by Anderson

TABLE 2
Example of Measurement Items and Sources

Construct	Item	
Employability (Rothwell & Arnold, 2007)	EMP1	Even if there were downsizing in this organisation, I am confident that I would be retained.
	EMP2	My personal networks in this organisation help me in my career.
	EMP3	I am aware of the opportunities arising in this organisation even if they are different to what I do now.
Mobility (Briscoe & Hall, 2006)	MOB1	I like the predictability that comes with working continuously for the same organisation.
	MOB2	I would feel very lost if I could not work for my current organisation.
	MOB3	I prefer to stay in a company I am familiar with rather than look for employment elsewhere.
Work-Life Balance (King, 2003)	WLB1	I live where I want rather than where my career demands.
	WLB2	I save my energy and effort for things outside work.
	WLB3	My work does not have a negative impact on my quality of life.

and Gerbing (1988), where the measurement model was tested first to validate the instruments, followed by the structural model testing to test the relationships that were hypothesised.

Hair *et al*. (2014) suggested that in addition to evaluating the magnitude of the R^2 values as a criterion of predictive accuracy, researchers should also examine Stone-Geisser's (Geisser, 1974; Stone, 1974) Q^2 value. This measure is an indicator of the model's predictive relevance. According to Hair *et al*. (2014), "PLS-SEM exhibits predictive relevance, it can accurately predict the data points of indicators in reflective measurement models of endogenous construct and endogenous single-item constructs" (p. 178). The Q^2 or predictive relevance analysis was done by using the blindfolding procedure using a distance value of 6. Blindfolding is a measure which builds on a sample re-use technique, which omits a part of the data matrix, estimates the model parameters and predicts the omitted part using the estimates (Hair *et al*., 2014). If the Q^2 value is larger than 0, we can conclude that the model has sufficient predictive relevance (Fornell & Cha, 1994). The Q^2 was 0.174, which was greater than 0, thus predictive relevance was confirmed.

TABLE 3
Measurement Model

Construct	Item	Loadings	AVE	CR
Employability	EMP1	0.797	0.515	0.921
	EMP2	0.749		
	EMP3	0.600		
	EMP4	0.675		
	EMP5	0.744		
	EMP6	0.624		
	EMP7	0.772		
	EMP8	0.756		
	EMP9	0.727		
	EMP10	0.779		
	EMP11	0.640		
Mobility	MOB1	0.627	0.589	0.876
	MOB2	0.707		
	MOB3	0.837		
	MOB4	0.802		
	MOB5	0.841		
Work Life Balance	WLB3	0.897	0.758	0.904
	WLB4	0.837		
	WLB5	0.876		

Note: WLB1 and WLB2 were deleted due to low loading.
         AVE = Average Variance Extracted, CR = Composite Reliability

TABLE 4
Discriminant Validity

Construct	Employability	Mobility	Work Life Balance
Employability	0.718		
Mobility	0.220	0.767	
Work Life Balance	0.255	0.135	0.870

Note: The diagonals represent the square root of the AVE, while the off-diagonals represent the correlations

TABLE 5
Loadings and Cross Loadings

Items	Employability	Mobility	Work Life Balance
EMP1	0.797	0.190	0.083
EMP2	0.749	0.243	0.159
EMP3	0.600	0.181	0.209
EMP4	**0.675**	0.105	0.211
EMP5	**0.744**	0.060	0.170
EMP6	**0.624**	0.044	0.218
EMP7	**0.772**	0.150	0.275
EMP8	**0.756**	0.066	0.254
EMP9	**0.727**	0.089	0.259
EMP10	**0.779**	0.196	0.175
EMP11	**0.640**	0.084	0.134
MOB1	0.147	**0.627**	0.152
MOB2	0.141	**0.707**	-0.015
MOB3	0.193	**0.837**	0.083
MOB4	0.144	**0.802**	0.087
MOB5	0.199	**0.841**	0.154
WLB3	0.198	0.148	**0.897**
WLB4	0.251	0.080	**0.837**
WLB5	0.239	0.103	0.876

TABLE 6
Hypothesis Testing

	Dependent = Mobility	
	Main Effect	Interaction Effect
	Std Beta	Std. Beta
Employability	0.198***	0.212***
Work Life Balance	0.084	0.070
Work Life Balance*Employability		0.203*
R^2	0.055	0.093
R^2 Change	0.055	0.038**

***$p < 0.01$, **$p < 0.05$, *$p < 0.1$

Structural Model

Next, we proceeded with the path analysis to test the two hypotheses generated. The results are presented in Fig.2 and Fig.3 and Table 5. The R^2 value was 0.055, suggesting that 5.5% of the variance in mobility could be explained by employability. There was a positive relationship ($\beta = 0.212$, p< 0.01) between employability and mobility. Thus, H1 was supported.

The second hypothesis (H2) was to test the moderating effect of work life balance. To test this hypothesis, we used the product-indicator approach as suggested by Henseler and Fassott (2010). We created the interaction term between the employability and work life balance and before doing this interaction, we mean centred the two variables to reduce multicollinearity. When the interaction effect was entered into the model, the R^2 increased to 0.093, giving an R^2 change of 3.8%. The interaction effect was significant ($\beta = 0.203$, p< 0.1).

Thus, H2 of this study was also supported. The effect size f^2 as suggested by Cohen (1988) was 0.042, which is considered small. As suggested by Dawson (2014), we plotted the interaction effect to see how the moderator changes the relationship between employability and mobility. The result is shown in Fig.4. The relationship between employability and mobility was stronger when work life balance was higher, whereas low work-life balance had no impact on the employability-mobility relationship.

DISCUSSION

Employability has emerged as a focus point for those seeking ongoing, worthwhile employment in the labour market (Forrier & Sels, 2003; Rothwell & Arnold, 2007). Employability is given much attention due to organisational needs for flexibility in a changing labour market, by the present job mobility rates (involving change of employer, and/or occupation) and the
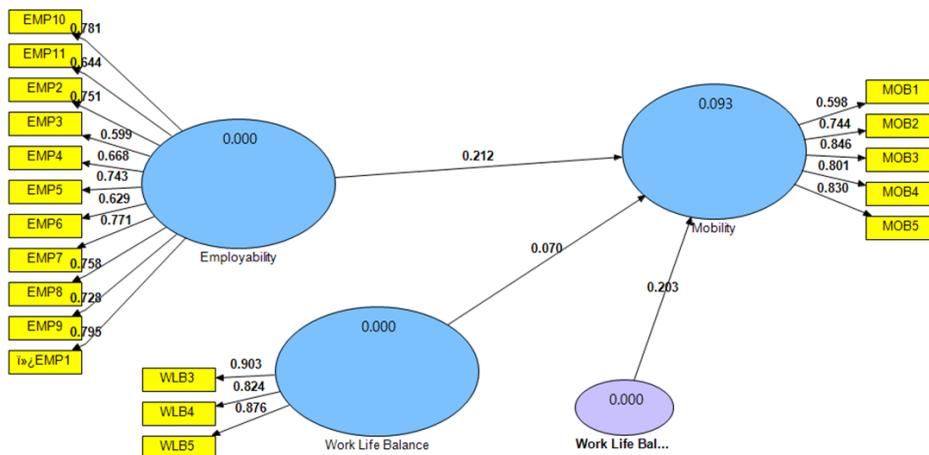

Fig.2: Path Coefficients of Employability, Mobility and Work Life Balance

growing pool of "free agents" or consultants (Bonfiglioli *et al*., 2006). For an individual, employability is an indicator of his/her opportunity to acquire and keep an attractive job in the labour market (Thijssen *et al*., 2008). Hence, employability can lead to the individual moving into other positions within the organisation or taking up new positions in other firms or industries. Thus, there is a relationship between employability and inter or intra-organisational mobility.

It is highlighted in this study that the domestic sphere influences career choices as individuals give priority to their family life (Sullivan & Mainiero, 2007). Ibarra (2003) found that individuals declined promotions
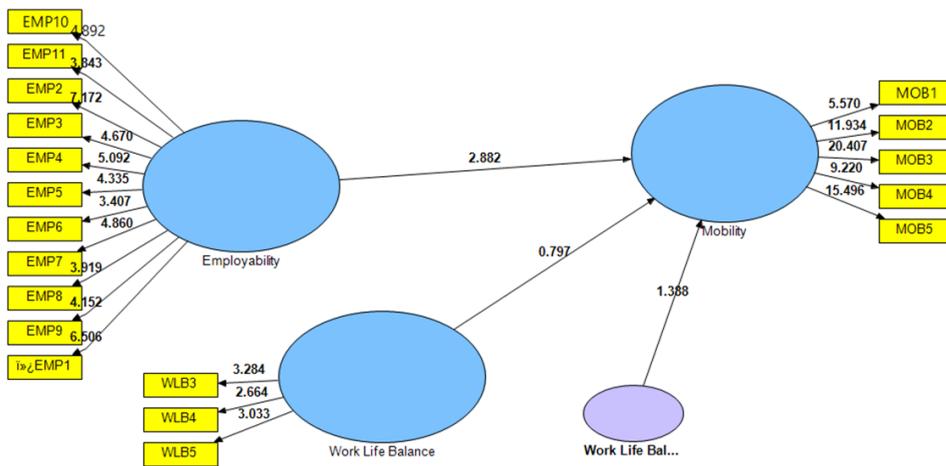

Fig.3: Bootstrapping of Path Coefficients of Employability, Mobility and Work-Life Balance
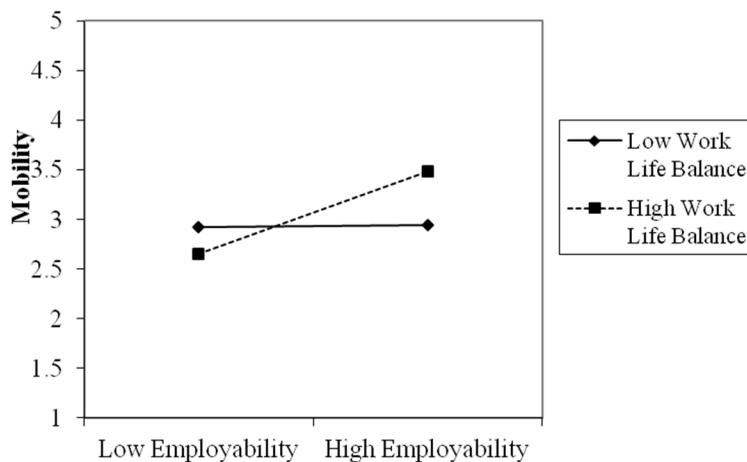

Fig.4: Interaction Plot

in order to spend more time with family and friends. Similarly, Moore (2002) found that employees, who were disappointed with the inflexibility of the corporations and the lack of concern for work-family balance, integrated their work and non-work lives by starting their own business. The strong influence of work-life balance on the employability-mobility relationship was clearly seen in this study.

As mentioned earlier, studies have looked at the relationships between employability and work-life balance (see Direnzo *et al.*, 2015; Hobson, 2011) and employability and mobility (Raendonck *et al.*, 2012; Rosenberg *et al.*, 2012). This study however has studied the relationship between all the three variables, thus enhancing the understanding of career and contributing to the body of knowledge in career development. The study also has highlighted the need for an organisation to realise the high importance placed by individuals on work-life balance. In fact, employees' disposition to move to another job or position is very much linked to work-life balance (Lambert & Kossek, 2005). Organisations can draw up policies and procedures to enhance this balance among the employees, including changing their inflexible corporate policies to allow for more adaptability and flexibility. The changes could include flexible work schedules, compressed work-week, job-sharing, telecommuting and other similar arrangements.

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

As employability will remain a phenomenon in the world of work and career, it will be useful to conduct more studies in this area. It is interesting to test the relationships between employability and other components such as personality traits, learning and career planning competencies, among others. Age could be used as a predictor variable in future studies. The younger, well-educated employees of Generation X and Y are claimed to desire employability rather than long-term employment (Bogdanowicz & Bailey, 2002). However, many mid-to-late career workers seem to struggle in developing strategies to manage their employability. Future studies could look at multi-source ratings (e.g., employees and their supervisor) as these could reflect more differentiated evaluation of employability, mobility and work-life balance.

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