Maastricht University

Sustaining the employability of the low skilled worker

Citation for published version (APA):

Sanders, J. (2016). *Sustaining the employability of the low skilled worker: development, mobility and work redesign*. [Doctoral Thesis, Maastricht University]. ROA. https://doi.org/10.26481/dis.20160708js

Document status and date:
Published: 01/01/2016

DOI:
10.26481/dis.20160708js

Document Version:
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Please check the document version of this publication:

• A submitted manuscript is the version of the article upon submission and before peer-review. There can be important differences between the submitted version and the official published version of record. People interested in the research are advised to contact the author for the final version of the publication, or visit the DOI to the publisher's website.
• The final author version and the galley proof are versions of the publication after peer review.
• The final published version features the final layout of the paper including the volume, issue and page numbers.

Link to publication

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Valorisation Addendum

Chapter 9: Valorisation Addendum

As pointed out in the introduction to this thesis, sustaining employability has become a topical issue in national and EU labour market as well as in company HR policies. Two major developments have triggered this: the 21st century technology based and highly dynamic labour market and the rapidly ageing (working) population putting pressure on social security and pension systems' affordability in Western societies and on the continuity of businesses. This thesis focuses on sustaining less educated (older) employees' employability. Not only are these employees in precarious jobs and with fragile employability, but they also less often participate in HR activities aimed at sustaining employability, such as training or job-to-job mobility. Also, they are at growing risk of being 'crowded out' by employees with an intermediate level of education, whose jobs are gradually disappearing due to automation of specific tasks. Central aim of this thesis is, therefore, to get a better understanding of why less educated (older) employees do not participate in HR activities to sustain their employability and to find ways to stimulate participation in these HR activities so that current and future skills (mis)matches, as well as claims on social security systems can be minimized and postponed as much as possible.

9.1 General implications

Generally speaking, findings in this thesis support earlier findings in sustainable employability research. This thesis adds to these findings, however, in two ways. It mainly uses longitudinal panel data and it focuses solely on less educated (older) employees, generating ideas for HR policies aimed at this important target group for sustaining employability. My findings do not imply that there is a need for very different HR approaches to the target group of less educated (older) employees. They rather suggest that existing HR policies should also be applied to less educated (older) employees. This needs to be done, however, with an appropriate pace and with the explicit demand that these HR policies will be positive experiences for less educated (older) employees, rather than negative ones.

Findings in this thesis are highly relevant for HR practitioners. I address implications for HR practice in more detail in section 9.2 of this addendum. Findings are also relevant, however, for national and EU policy makers, who define and develop (inter)national frameworks to encourage employers and employees to sustain employability in general and that of less educated older employees in particular. Last but not least, findings are relevant for individual employees, who have a lot to gain by mainly taking part in evidence based sustainable employability programs.

9.2 Implications for HR practice

Chapter 2: Focus on three routes

First, theoretically, Chapter 2 explains how skills and motivation mismatches occur and what can be done to prevent or cure these skills and motivation mismatches. Chapter 2 suggests HR practitioners to focus on three main routes in sustaining less educated employees' employability. These three routes are development (changing the employee), mobility (changing the work and the employee) and work redesign (changing the work). Aligning activities along these three routes will help HR practitioners to frame, monitor and study HR practices and their effectiveness.

Chapters 3, 4 and 5: Development and mobility

On development, Chapter 3 finds that less educated employees participate less in training, and that this is caused by lacking training intentions. The lack of training intentions is caused by a less positive attitude toward training and by weaker pre-training self-efficacy. These findings suggest HR practitioners to focus on developing and maintaining positive attitudes toward development and change in individual workers, teams, departments and throughout the organisation. Also, they should actively seek ways to strengthen less educated employees' pre-training self-efficacy, for instance by stimulating management and co-worker support for those who engage in development activities.

On strengthening less educated employees' pre-training self-efficacy, Chapter 4 finds that gaining positive learning experiences strengthens pre-training self-efficacy so that training intentions and training participation are stimulated. These findings suggest that HR practitioners need to focus on implementing practices that provide less educated (older) employees with a positive experience. Building partly on the findings in Chapter 4, Chapter 5 shows that less educated older employees are less mobile and that this is also caused by a weaker (pre-mobility) self-efficacy.

Parallel to the findings in Chapter 4, findings in Chapter 5 suggest strengthening pre-mobility self-efficacy by having employees gain positive mobility experiences. This goes especially when less educated (older) employees are up for their first new learning or mobility experience in many years. Although the literature on how to establish positive learning or mobility experiences among less educated (older) employees is scarce, some suggestions can be derived from literature on positive learning experience in general (see box below).

Box 9.1

1. Make sure there is a clear picture of, and consensus on the skills a worker has acquired.
2. Focus on a good fit between on the one hand the content of a development or mobility activity, and on the other hand the already acquired skills.
3. Present a worker with accurate information about his or her development and mobility opportunities.
4. Focus on finding 'guides' (trainers, coaches, mentors) who are well attuned to a group or an individual.
5. Guides should focus on providing a positive and safe climate for development and mobility activities. This will also stimulate the positive attitude toward these kinds of activities and it will help employees deal with for instance 'exam anxiety'.
6. Guides need to pay attention to the individual worker and provide feedback on commitment rather than on performance standards in development and mobility activities.
7. Guides should try and minimize competition among colleagues.
8. Stimulate supervisory, co-worker and other relevant peer support (friends, parents, children or spouse) in discussing positive (or negative) experiences with development or mobility.

Chapter 6: Implications for HR practice; work redesign

Chapter 6 explores the third route in sustaining employability, that of work redesign. In Chapter 6, I show which work characteristics are most eligible for redesign when the aim is to increase less educated older employees' work ability and work motivation. Findings in Chapter 6 suggest HR practitioners to start experimenting with work redesign so that there is more autonomy, task variety, social support by colleagues and supervisors and interaction with customers and less emotional workload. These work redesigns generally would have desirable effects on less educated older employees' work ability and work motivation. Building on these findings and recent literature on collaborative job crafting (Leana et al., 2009), I also suggest HR practitioners to experiment with involving less educated employees in collaborative work redesign to match individual skills, needs and aspirations.

Chapter 7: Implications for HR practice; what route works

Finally, Chapter 7 studies the impact of a selection of development, mobility and work redesign activities on skills shortage recovery among less educated older employees. The chapter only shows positive effects of off the job training (1 or more days) on skills shortage recovery. On the job instructions (development), job change and promotion (mobility activities) have no effect at all on skills shortage recovery. Chapter 7 even finds that demotion (mobility) and getting fewer, more or different tasks (work redesign) decreases rather than increases the chance of recovering from a skills shortage.

On development, findings in Chapter 7 suggest that getting instructions and on the job training do not lead to skills shortage recovery among less educated older employees. They need training courses (off the job and at least more than 1 day, preferably even more than 5 days) to keep up. Literature, however, also suggests that for less educated older workers training courses should

have as little resemblance to a classroom as possible, suggesting workplace learning as a suitable way to engage in development activities. Workplace learning may lead to a positive learning experience, but findings in Chapter 7 suggest that this will not be enough to recover from a perceived skills shortage. My findings also suggests that HR practitioners should look for, and experiment with, other settings than the workplace or the classroom for both learning experiences that are positive as well as sufficiently effective. Suggestions for promising new learning settings are simulators, augmented reality, massive open online courses and serious gaming.

On mobility and work redesign, findings in Chapter 7 imply that the activities on these routes I studied are not effective for better matching less educated older employees' skills sets to the jobs and tasks at hand, and in that sense they do not help employees to recover from a perceived skills shortage. The findings do suggest, however, that mobility and work redesign activities might be effective for stimulating less educated older employees to learn new skills and could via this route contribute to their employability. To conclude, findings in Chapter 7 on both the dynamic process of change, perceived skills shortage and actively restoring the match between the skills of employees and the skills demanded in their jobs, underpin the importance of at least two steps for HR practitioners to be taken:

1. Monitor levels of perceived skills shortage within your company and try to help employees to recover from these as fast and appropriately as possible through substantial training or, if at all possible, through slowing down the speed of organisational change in order to keep as many employees on board as possible;
2. Monitor and maintain the motivation of employees to invest in their sustainable employability, either through training, mobility and work redesign by proper evaluation of the quality of specific HR practices in terms of satisfaction and effectiveness.

9.3 Dissemination of the findings

The findings of this thesis have been presented and discussed during national and international scientific conferences, such as several EAWOP Conferences and small group meetings, an ICOH-WOPS conference and bi-annual Dutch HRM Conferences. Findings were also presented and discussed at Dutch HR practitioners conferences, such as the annual *Dutch P&O Actueel 2013* conference in Houten. Findings in Chapters 3, 4, 5 and 6 have also been extensively presented and discussed with EU (DG Employment committee) and national policymakers (Ministry of Social Affairs). Findings were also used by TNO staff in developing several intervention programs such as 'Staymobil' and 'Taken van de Toekomst (TvdT)' (Tomorrow's Tasks).

TNO Staymobil program

Staymobil is a cooperative intervention building and testing program aimed at sustaining employability. Based on the findings of this thesis, the approach explicitly gives employees a say in which interventions should be implemented and in the content of such interventions, whether they are aimed at development, mobility or work redesign. Since 2014, the Staymobil program is tested in several Dutch companies (Philips, Police, Sociale Verzekeringsbank, Ministry of Internal Affairs). Staymobil starts with a group mind map to decide what sustainable employability actually is for employees and managers and to see what organisational and personal factors stimulate sustainable employability and what factors do not. Next, sustainable employability is measured and determinants and effects are analysed. Based on the results of these analyses in two so-called 'intervention mapping sessions' employees and managers decide which intervention(s) should be implemented in order to strengthen sustainable employability in their organization. These interventions are then implemented in an experimental group, and not in the control group, so that in the final step effects of the intervention that was implemented can be measured. Articles on the successful implementation of Staymobil at Sociale Verzekeringsbank were published in two Dutch HR magazines: *PW de Gids* (Sanders & Keijzer, 2015a) and *OR Informatie* (Sanders & Keijzer, 2015b).

TNO Taken van de Toekomst (TvdT) (Tomorrow's Tasks)

Taken van de Toekomst (TvdT) is a digitally supported action approach that aims to help employees and managers to establish current and future tasks, and whether these tasks will grow in importance or not. Next, using a tailor-made online Job Analysis tool a company analyses to what extent its current staff feels skilled and motivated to perform both today's and tomorrow's tasks. Employees and management will thus gain a clear picture of the skills and motivation currently available for the tasks at hand. Moreover, they get an idea of whether these skills and motivation match future tasks, showing current and future skills and motivation mismatches on a task level. Based on the company analysis, advice is given on which development, mobility or work redesign activities should be implemented in order to sustain employability on the individual worker and company level. TvdT has been developed so that it helps HR practitioners come up with interventions that meet the requirements for 'positive experiences', as derived from Chapters 3, 4 and 5 in this thesis (see also Box 9.1). For instance, TvdT gives a clear picture of already acquired skills and helps fit development and mobility activities to these already acquired skills. Also, TvdT helps to give accurate information about realistic internal development and mobility opportunities and gives (some) employees a say in defining future tasks. Experiments with 'Taken van de Toekomst' are currently taking place at two Dutch organisations in the public sector to test whether this intervention is effective in sustaining employees' employability.