



Master thesis Human Resource Studies

## Employee attitudes towards engaging in sustainable employability initiatives at work: a qualitative study

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## Abstract

Organizations nowadays invest considerable time, effort and resources in promoting their employees' sustainable employability. Sustainable employability initiatives centered around career development, work and health policy, and working conditions are implemented within organizations in order to stimulate employees' work ability and well-being. This study focuses on mapping the factors that influence employee engagement in sustainable employability initiatives within a global science-based organization in the Netherlands. Factors which are shown to affect employee engagement in other development activities form the reference point of analysis in this study. These factors are divided into three categories: individual-level factors, context-level factors, and initiative characteristics. In addition, employees' sense of responsibility for maintaining their sustainable employability is assumed to affect their engagement in sustainable employability initiatives as well. After conducting semi-structured interviews with 19 employees, additional influential factors emerged after analysis. All relevant influential factors are incorporated into a newly developed theoretical model of factors which influence employee engagement in sustainable employability initiatives, with *personality*, *perceived support* and *promotion and visibility* being the most important individual-level factor, context-level factor, and initiative characteristic respectively. Resulting from the interviews, whether employees found sustainable employability development their own responsibility, the responsibility of their employer, or a shared responsibility between both parties, did not affect their orientation towards engaging in sustainable employability initiatives.

*Keywords:* employee engagement in sustainable employability initiatives, employee responsibility, employer responsibility, shared responsibility, individual-level factors, context-level factors, initiative characteristics.

## Introduction

Worldwide, substantial changes in the labor market and the changing nature of work have resulted in an increased need to promote workers' sustainable employability (Van der Heijden, Gorgievski & de Lange, 2016). It is expected that the combination of the ageing workforce, an ever tightening labor market and a shortage of skilled and knowledgeable employees in the future will have economic and social consequences (Kooij, De Lange, Jansen, & Dikkers, 2008). Therefore, organizations will need to focus on developing their employees' employability in a sustainable way. Sustainable employability is an important topic as it deals with employees' abilities to function adequately at work and in the labor market throughout their working lives (Fleuren et al., 2016). Sustainable employability focuses on the maintenance of workers' health, motivation, and working capacity or work ability now and in the future (Kooij, 2015). Not only is the objective of sustainable employability to safeguard employees' health, engagement and productivity in their current job, but also to prepare them to adjust to future changes that may lead to taking on different roles within the organization or possibly result in finding a new job elsewhere (Heijde & Van der Heijden, 2006).

Employers, employees, government and society all have an important role to play in stimulating, discussing and developing sustainable employability (Kluytmans & Ott, 1999; Schaufeli, 2011). Currently, many organizations are taking their responsibility and are investing in the sustainable employability of their employees by developing HRM policies and actions, and implement practices aimed at increasing workers' sustainable employability at work (Billett, Dymock, Johnson, & Martin, 2011; Semeijn, van Dam, van Vuuren, & van der Heijden, 2015; Veth, Emans, van der Heijden, Korzilius, & De Lange, 2015; van Harten, Knies, & Leisink, 2016; Ybema, van Vuuren & van Dam, 2017). However, opinions differ as to the extent of employer involvement in sustainable employability issues, since the dividing line between private matters or business-related problems is often indistinct (Brouwers, Engels, Heerkens & van der Beek, 2015). This raises the question whether sustainable employability development can be seen as mainly the responsibility of the individual employee, the employer, or if it is perhaps more of a shared responsibility between multiple parties involved. Therefore, the way employees regard this sense of responsibility for maintaining their sustainable employability will be investigated in this study to see how it affects employee engagement in sustainable employability initiatives.

An underexplored area within the scientific literature on sustainable employability is the degree of employee participation in sustainable employability initiatives offered to them by their employer. These initiatives can include anything from health- and fitness related activities at work involving sport classes, a dietician or nutrition expert, or vitality checks, to more career-related activities such as a job coach, job rotation or a mentor program for example. While literature on the various outcomes of sustainable employability initiatives is emerging (e.g., Kuoppala, Lamminpää, & Husman, 2008; Rongen, Robroek, van Lenthe & Burdorf, 2013), there are no common theoretical models yet to explain what exactly causes employees to engage in sustainable employability initiatives. This current study aims to give voice to employees by exploring their underlying motives (i.e. both motivating and hindering factors) that affect their attitudes towards engaging in sustainable employability initiatives, by means of conducting semi-structured interviews. For the purpose of this study, motivating and hindering factors that influence employee engagement in other development activities are used as a proxy for factors that might influence engagement in sustainable employability initiatives. These positively or negatively influential factors are grouped into individual-level factors, context-level factors, and initiative characteristics. For instance, individual-level factors could refer to personality, a proactive mindset or the importance a person places on developing their sustainable employability (Major, Turner & Fletcher, 2006). In turn, context-level factors could entail social support from colleagues, lack of opportunities offered by the employer, or the relationship with the supervisor among other things (Maurer, Weiss & Barbeite, 2003). Initiative characteristics could consist of lack of promotion or visibility of the program, or its accessibility for example (Hurtz & Williams, 2009). As a result, a theoretical model of factors that affect engagement in sustainable employability programs will be developed. In doing so, this study aims to contribute to filling the knowledge gap within the scientific literature on engagement in sustainable employability initiatives.

In addition to scientific contribution, this study also has practical relevance for organizations. Nowadays, organizations need employees who are highly employable in order to adapt to constant changes in the labor market (Heijde & Van der Heijden, 2006). A study by TNO in the Netherlands shows that over 40% of Dutch organizations are already investing in sustainable employability initiatives in 2014 (Kraan & Sanders, 2016). By taking into account the most important individual-level factors, context-level factors and initiative characteristics found in this study, which either positively or negatively affect employee's engagement in sustainable employability initiatives, organizations can map out the best way to implement

these initiatives. This way, organizations who attempt to increase employee engagement in sustainable employability initiatives know where exactly to direct their efforts.

This exploratory study aims to answer the following research question:

RQ: What motivates employees to engage in sustainable employability initiatives?

In order to answer the main research question, the following sub research questions will be addressed:

SQ1: What individual-level factors affect employee's engagement in sustainable employability initiatives?

SQ2: What context-level factors affect employee's engagement in sustainable employability initiatives?

SQ3: What initiative characteristics affect employee's engagement in sustainable employability initiatives?

SQ4: How does the topic of employer responsibility vs. employee responsibility on sustainable employability development affect employee's engagement in sustainable employability initiatives?

## Theoretical framework

### 2.1 Sustainable Employability

In order to answer the main research question, it is first necessary to fully investigate the concept of sustainable employability. In general, sustainable employability has been defined as the extent to which workers are able and willing to remain working now and in the future (SER, 2009; van der Heijden et al., 2016; van Dam et al., 2017; Ybema et al., 2017). The most detailed definition of sustainable employability within the scientific literature is:

Sustainable employability means that, throughout their working lives, workers can achieve tangible opportunities in the form of a set of capabilities. They also enjoy the necessary conditions that allow them to make a valuable contribution through their work, now and in the future, while safeguarding their health and welfare. This requires, on the one hand, a work context that facilitates this for them and on the other, the attitude and motivation to exploit these opportunities. (Van der Klink et al., 2016, p. 74)

This elaborate definition received criticism on various points which still need to be improved to make the definition more comprehensible (Fleuren et al., 2016). Fleuren et al. (2016) state that more clarity is needed as to what exactly ‘a set of capabilities’ are, and they find the definition counterintuitive, since it seems to treat sustainable employability as a characteristic of both the job and the individual at the same time. In the current study, therefore a more straightforward and more comprehensible definition by Thijssen (2000) is adopted: “sustainable employability is the set of personal and contextual factors which will affect the future employment position in a given labor market” [translated from Dutch] (Gründemann & de Vries, 2002). This definition is concise, but closely relates to the purpose of this study by including both personal and contextual factors. According to this definition, sustainable employability thus requires both a supportive work environment and employees with the attitude and motivation to explore and develop their capabilities (Brouwers et al., 2015). When there is a fit between work context factors and personal characteristics, a positive climate exists for the development of sustainable employability (Schaufeli, 2011).

According to the Social-Economic Council (SER, 2009) sustainable employability consists of the following three elements: *vitality*, *work ability* and *employability* (De Lange & Van der Heijden, 2013). Vitality stands for employees who are energetic, resilient, fit and tirelessly able to work with great perseverance (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2013). Work ability refers

to the extent to which one is physically, psychologically, and socially able to work (Ilmarinen, Tuomi & Seitsamo, 2005). Employability is the ability to continue to perform different tasks and functions now and in the future, both in their own company and, if necessary, in another company or in another sector (Van der Heijden, 2012). Factors such as age, health, personal resources, task characteristics, social-environmental characteristics, and culture and HR practices in organizations, all contribute to employees' vitality, work ability and employability (Semeijn et al., 2015).

## **2.2 Sustainable Employability Initiatives**

Sustainable employability initiatives can be approached from three perspectives: (a) career policy, (b) work and health policy, and (c) working conditions policy (Brouwer et al., 2012; Van Selm & Van der Heijden, 2013; Cuelenaere, Deckers, Siegert & De Bruin, 2009).

**Career policy.** Career policies in Dutch businesses and organizations are aimed at the maintenance of employee flexibility in a variety of possible ways and among employees of all ages (Van Selm & Van der Heijden, 2013). This perspective can be related to the *employability* element of sustainable employability, as described above. Dutch organizations have developed a number of career policy instruments, such as making personal development plans on a regular basis, and arranging job evaluation and career planning conversations. Other examples are training and educational programs designed to further develop competencies that are tailored to the needs of specific (groups of) employees, and possibilities for job rotation or other mobility tracks (Van Selm & Van der Heijden, 2013).

**Work and health policy.** Work and health policies in Dutch organizations are, on the one hand, aimed at the adjustment of tasks to employee physical abilities and, on the other hand, at the strengthening of physical resilience among employees. This perspective is comparable to the *vitality* element of sustainable employability, as defined by the Social-Economic Council (SER, 2009). Initiatives aimed at work and health policy modify specific circumstances under which work is performed (e.g. working time and intensity, type of employment contract, psychosocial factors at work, work-life balance, and health and safety policies within the organization) (Montano, Hoven & Siegrist, 2014). Examples of instruments aimed at health and life style stimulation are advice on nutrition and healthy behaviors, catering healthy food in company restaurants, and company fitness (Van Selm & Van der Heijden, 2013).

***Working conditions policy.*** This type of initiatives concern measures or actions related to adjusting the initial terms of employment (e.g. part-time work, flexible working hours, working at home). These initiatives also include measures or actions at a macro level that promotes changes in the current organizational policy (e.g. financial incentives to stimulate working past retirement age, flexible pension plans). This perspective is comparable to the *work ability* element of sustainable employability. Examples of initiatives focused on work condition policy would be opportunities for flexible working hours, working from home, and working with flexible schedules that are based on individual preferences contingent upon age and life-span position. On a macro level, organizations can offer part-time pension instead of early retirement for instance (Van Selm & Van der Heijden, 2013).

Existing research on the effectiveness of sustainable employability initiatives has found that sustainable employability initiatives only have small to moderate effects on factors such as employees' work ability and well-being (e.g., Kuoppala, Lamminpää, & Husman, 2008; Rongen, Robroek, Van Lenthe & Burdorf, 2013). One possible explanation for the rather small effects is that building sustainable employability depends not only on the mere availability of workplace initiatives but also on the positive attitudes and motivation of the employees who are supposed to use them (Van der Klink et al., 2016). Employees experience motivating or hindering factors that affect their attitude towards sustainable employability initiatives.

### **2.3 Employee Engagement in Sustainable Employability Initiatives**

The goal of this study is to map out the factors that motivate or hinder employee engagement in sustainable employability initiatives. Employees' engagement could be influenced by numerous factors, which are yet to be further explored during this study. Not much is known about these factors yet, but the following factors are assumed to have an effect on employee engagement in sustainable employability initiatives based on other available literature and theory on employee engagement in development activities. Assuming that these factors are just a minor part of the full range of determinants of engagement in sustainable employability, they form the reference point of this qualitative analysis. After listing all factors that influence engagement in development activities throughout the scientific literature, these factors were clustered into groups based on shared characteristics to create more structure and coherence among these factors. The definition of sustainable employability used in this study makes a distinction between personal and contextual factors, which are both needed for the successful



development of sustainable employability (Schaufeli, 2011). Based on this distinction, most of the factors were divided into individual-level factors and context-level factors. However, some factors did not seem to fit within either of these categories. Therefore, a third category, initiative characteristics, was created to include all factors that were specific to initiatives. However, there sometimes is a certain amount of overlap between context-level factors and initiative characteristics. For example, *promotion and visibility*, which is currently residing under initiative characteristics. This factor is placed here because the visibility of the initiatives is often only applicable to these certain initiatives. However, promotion and visibility of sustainable employability as a core value within the organization can also be considered a context-level factor in this regard. Following this argumentation, *promotion and visibility* was ultimately placed under initiative characteristics after careful consideration. Regardless of some degree of overlap between context-level factors and initiative characteristics, they do fundamentally differ from each other. Therefore, the distinction between context-level factors and initiative characteristics stays in place. For the purpose of this study, all factors are thus divided into the following categories: individual-level factors, context-level factors, and initiative characteristics.

### **2.3.1 Individual-level factors.**

***Personality.*** Research shows that certain big five personality traits such as openness, extraversion, and conscientiousness predict motivation to learn and development activity (Major, Turner & Fletcher, 2006). A person with proactive personality is one who identifies opportunities and acts on them, shows initiative, takes action, and perseveres until they bring about meaningful change. Individuals high in proactive personality have high intrinsic motivation, motivation to learn, and aspirations to advance in their career (Major et al., 2006; Orvis & Leffler, 2011). This could mean that proactive individuals, who are curious, are open to new challenges, who show ambition and an interest in a healthy lifestyle, would seek out sustainable employability initiatives by their own initiative. Thus, they are probably more likely to participate in initiatives.

***Learning goal orientation.*** Individuals high in learning goal orientation display a general desire to learn new skills and increase their competence in areas of importance to them (Dweck, 1986). They also have a greater tendency to see opportunities to learn in various situations. Learning-goal-oriented individuals are more likely to value opportunities to learn

and develop their job-related skills and therefore have more positive attitudes toward future participation in development activities (Hurtz & Williams, 2009). Therefore, learning-goal-oriented employees would be more inclined to participate in sustainable employability initiatives focused on their development.

***Self-efficacy.*** Self-efficacy, or employees' beliefs that they are capable of improving and developing their career-relevant skills, have been examined in relation to attitudes toward employee development programs in organizations (Maurer, Mitchell, & Barbeite, 2002). Individuals with high levels of self-efficacy are more likely to choose to participate in challenging assignments and take responsibility for personal development (Noe & Wilk, 1993). Maurer and Tarulli (1994) found evidence that self-efficacy with respect to improving career-related skills was related to intentions to engage in employee development activities. Research has shown that self-efficacy is a key predictor of choosing to perform a behavior or pursuing a task as well as of persistence, thoughts, and feelings during the task (Bandura, 1997; Maurer et al., 2003). Overall, employees with higher levels of self-efficacy should have more favorable attitudes toward participation in development activities (Maurer et al., 2003).

***Age.*** Older workers may not be perceived as capable or interested in learning and developing or as good investments for development, or learning and growth may not be perceived as age-appropriate behavior (Maurer et al., 2003). As people age, they perceive less organizational support for career development, but the topic of developing their sustainable employability becomes more important to them (Kooij et al., 2008), which should result in older employees being more engaged in sustainable employability initiatives.

### **2.3.2 Context-level factors.**

***Perceived benefits and barriers.*** This could be perceived extrinsic benefits, so the beliefs that tangible outcomes such as better pay, promotions, or job security will result. Also intrinsic benefits, such as having more interesting work, enjoyment, or reaching one's potential (Maurer et al., 2003) might contribute to employees' engagement in sustainable employability initiatives. The more personal, job-related, and career-related benefits that employees feel they can obtain from participating in development activities, the greater their degree of participation in such activities (Noe & Wilk, 1993). In contrast, perceived barriers (e.g. lack of time, high workload, uncertainty) could hinder a person's willingness to participate in certain activities. Employees who have insufficient resources to successfully complete work assignments (e.g.

lack of time to meet deadlines, inadequate budget support) experience frustration, become dissatisfied with their job, and likely devote most of their time, attention, and energy to trying to complete daily work assignments (Noe & Wilk, 1993).

***Perceived support.*** Social support refers to the availability of assistance from others regarding work outcomes including the support individuals receive from supervisors, coworkers, and subordinates in regard to their learning and development activities (Maurer et al., 2003). If coworkers also participate in these initiatives, employees are more likely to join them because they would not be alone. Employees might feel more comfortable in participating, since the initiatives are accepted among their coworkers as well. In addition, the supervisor needs to offer employees the opportunity to work on their development. Lack of supervisor support can be a hindering factor when the supervisor does not stimulate their employees' development. Besides, the supervisor is assumed to have an exemplary function as a role model because the supervisor stimulates employee development but also signals shared norms, values and beliefs. Research shows that the extent to which the environment stimulates employees to develop their sustainable employability is mostly dependent on employees' partners and direct supervisors, less on co-workers and friends, and least by members of the HR department (Gründemann & de Vries, 2002).

***Insecurity.*** Employees with expectations of job insecurity are likely more motivated to participate in development activities in order to ensure employability. In addition, job loss and organizational change may result in employees taking personal responsibility for their career development to prepare themselves for potential future employment changes (Cavanaugh & Noe, 1999). On the other hand, individuals may think that developing their sustainable employability gives off a signal that they lack competence, or that they are preparing for a job elsewhere. Especially in a work context with high levels of job insecurity due to organizational downsizing and restructuring, employees would be less likely to signal that they want to focus on their development in fear of getting laid off.

### **2.3.3 Initiative characteristics.**

***Promotion and visibility.*** Organizations should make extra efforts to advertise and publicize the available opportunities to improve participation rates (Hurtz & Williams, 2009). Sending email updates and putting up posters around the work place are just examples of ways

to promote the available initiatives. Promotion can be an important tool to stimulate and trigger employees to engage in sustainable employability initiatives.

***The right initiatives.*** Reactions to past participation can have a strong impact on shaping attitudes toward future activities. Organizations should therefore focus on careful selection and development of activities they offer to their employees to ensure they are seen as worthwhile and to ensure those activities get a strong reputation among the workforce (Hurtz & Williams, 2009). Shoddily selected and executed development activities with no clear relation to outcomes that are valued by the employees will likely result in negative evaluations and more negative attitudes and intentions toward future participation in those activities (Hurtz & Williams, 2009). Employees who felt that employee development would be enjoyable, worthwhile, and would lead to desired outcomes were almost certain to indicate they would participate in future activities (Hurtz & Williams, 2009).

***Voluntary participation.*** Research suggests that the more voluntary the activities are; the less likely employees are to participate (Hurtz & Williams, 2009). This contradicts some other research indicating that control-related constructs, such as choice and locus of control, have a positive impact on training motivation and behavior (Hurtz & Williams, 2009). However, when employees feel like they are being forced to participate and that they do not have a choice, this could backfire and also negatively influence engagement in sustainable employability initiatives.

In short, engagement in sustainable employability initiatives is assumed to be influenced by individual-level factors, context-level factors and initiative characteristics. Positive employee attitudes towards engaging in sustainable employability initiatives can be fostered by ensuring that the available employee development opportunities are relevant and of high quality, so that they will be widely perceived as useful, enjoyable, and instrumental in achieving desired outcomes (Hurtz & Williams, 2009). Also, encouraging a positive and supportive social and organizational environment will lead to employees feeling supported in taking time away from their work to engage in voluntary development behavior (Hurtz & Williams, 2009).

## **2.4 Responsibility of Managing Sustainable Employment**

The social partners (i.e. associations of employers and employees) in the Netherlands have agreed that “employers and employees share responsibility for sustainable employability”

(Stichting van de Arbeid, 2013, p. 11). However, opinions are unclear about who is ultimately responsible for managing sustainable employability – the employer or the employee? Employees have a responsibility to develop their talents and to maintain their knowledge and skills as well as possible. In doing so, employees keep their options in their current and future work open and remain sustainable employable. The employer has a responsibility to create conditions under which employees can develop within their work and can use their talents, knowledge and skills. Additionally, the government and society also play a part in stimulating, discussing and developing sustainable employability (Kluytmans & Ott, 1999; Schaufeli, 2011).

#### **2.4.1 Individual responsibility for sustainable employability.**

Lately, the form of psychological contract between employers and employees has shifted from employment security to employability (Clarke & Patrickson, 2008). The term ‘psychological contract’ refers to “the unspoken promise, not present in the small print of the employment contract of what the employer gives, and what the employees give in return” (Baruch & Hind, 1999, p. 299). This ‘from lifetime employment to lifetime employability’ transition means that employees will no longer be provided with the security of working for one employer throughout their entire career, but instead they should be offered possibilities to secure their capabilities to obtain and retain jobs throughout their working lives (Thijssen et al., 2008). In ‘the new psychological contract’ of employability, mutual obligation and responsibility for developing and maintaining advanced general skills as opposed to the more traditional concept of firm-specific skills is emphasized (Clarke & Patrickson, 2008). For employees, sustainable employability now means lifelong learning, the opportunity to grow and develop, and to invest in their own future. Employees are responsible for exploiting the opportunities they encounter to strengthen their internal and external labor market value (Gründemann & de Vries, 2002). Although employability is nowadays principally regarded as the responsibility of the individual, it is also widely acknowledged that employers have a significant role to play (Clarke & Patrickson, 2008).

#### **2.4.2 The role of the employer in sustainable employability.**

The organization's role nowadays, rather than control employees' careers, is to support and enable their employees' in achieving sustainable employability (Baruch, 2006; Thijssen et al., 2008). Sustainable employability is a contextual concept, since it is not merely an individual characteristic, but rather an interaction between the individual and the job (Schaufeli, 2011). This implies that employers have a responsibility for enhancing their employees' sustainable employability by providing opportunities that support employees in developing their talents, knowledge, and skills (Schaufeli, 2011). This includes an organization's responsibility to provide its employees with sufficient training and development opportunities, which is described by Baruch (2006) as the essence of employability. Similarly, some scholars go as far as to state that employees can only be sustainably employable if their organization enables them to enhance their capabilities (Van der Klink et al., 2016). Organizations also have a lot to gain if their employees are sustainable employable. Organizations need employees who are healthy and most of all flexible, so that organizations can better cope with changes in the market.

#### **2.4.3 The government as facilitator of sustainable employability.**

As a side note to this responsibility discussion, the government and society also play a part in stimulating, discussing and developing sustainable employability (Kluytmans & Ott, 1999; Schaufeli, 2011). A well-trained and broadly employable professional population contributes to the competitive capacity of the economy (Kluytmans & Ott, 1999). In addition, society would benefit of a greater sustainable employable workforce. Currently, the Dutch government acts as a facilitator to overcome potential resistance from employers about implementing sustainable employability practices. For example, the Dutch Ministry for Social Affairs and Employment commissioned the development of a manifesto of sustainable employability, demonstrating a strong business case for sustainable employability (Rijksoverheid, 2012). The governmental policy on sustainable employability in the Netherlands calls for employer investment in employees' education, development of new knowledge and skills, a healthy work environment, and the reduction of absenteeism. Employees also need to be aware of their own responsibility to remain sustainable employable (Rijksoverheid, 2014).

To summarize, employers and employees both share responsibility for ensuring sustainable employability, with the government taking up a more facilitating role. Employees

have a responsibility to develop their talents and to maintain their knowledge and skills as well as possible. The employer has a responsibility to create conditions under which employees can develop within their work and can use their talents, knowledge and skills. It would be interesting to study the differences in opinion on this matter among the participants in this study, since in practice the opinions generally differ on who is ultimately responsible for fostering sustainable employability. Therefore, the way employees regard this sense of responsibility for maintaining their sustainable employability will be investigated to see how it affects employee engagement in sustainable employability initiatives.

## 2.5 Conceptual Model

The final conceptual model is provided in figure 1. In addition to exploring the effect of responsibility for maintaining sustainable employability on employee engagement in sustainable employability initiatives, the initial influential individual-level factors, context-level factors and initiative characteristics found in scientific literature on development activities will also be investigated. It is expected that individual-level factors (i.e. personality, learning-goal orientation, self-efficacy, and age), context-level factors (i.e. perceived benefits and barriers, perceived support, and insecurity), and initiative characteristics (i.e. promotion and visibility, the right initiatives, and voluntary participation) will affect employee engagement in sustainable employability initiatives. It is also expected that additional influential factors will emerge from the interviews.

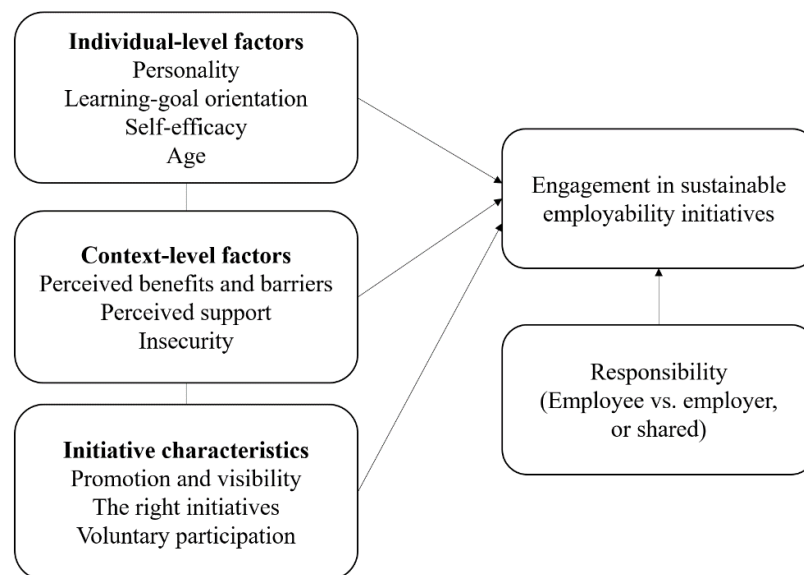


Figure 1: Conceptual model

## **Method**

### **3.1 Research design**

The design of this research is qualitative in order to provide an in-depth understanding of the underlying motivating or hindering factors that could influence employee's attitudes towards engaging in sustainable employability initiatives on the one hand, and employee's opinions on the extent to which sustainable employability is a shared responsibility on the other. Because limited scientific research exists in these areas, this research has an exploratory nature. The level of analysis in this study is centered on the individual level, since the focus of this research lies on the attitudes of the individual employee. Data collection has been conducted through face-to-face semi-structured interviews with 19 respondents, all working at a global science-based organization in the Netherlands. The interviews were held at one specific moment in time, making this a cross-sectional study. Open-ended questions were used so participants can explain their underlying thoughts and emotions. This is also the advantage of qualitative research as opposed to quantitative research (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003). By conducting interviews, a more in-depth contextual portrayal of employee attitudes towards engagement in sustainable employability initiatives was given.

### **3.2 Sample**

This research focuses on individual employees of the selected organization who differ in their attitudes towards engaging in sustainable employability initiatives. Ideally, both employees with a strong positive attitude, and employees with a negative attitude towards these initiatives are represented in the sample. The sample technique which is applied to collect data in this study is non-probability sampling, because the respondents are not randomly selected (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003). Instead, respondents are selected through convenience sampling by asking employees in a company newsletter if they would like to participate in the research. A large group of employees responded to the newsletter. Their attitudes towards engaging in sustainable employability initiatives are estimated by the contact person at the organization where the interviews are conducted. In the end, 19 employees are selected from this group to be participants in this study based on their difference in attitudes and their demographics in order to achieve a representative sample in terms of attitudes, gender, age, function and work site. Table 1 describes the demographic characteristics of the respondents in the sample. Gender is



almost equally distributed (42% female, 58% male). The average age of the respondents is 51.63 years ( $n = 19$ ,  $SD = 8.83$ ). The average number of years of employment is 23.16 years ( $n = 19$ ,  $SD = 12.94$ ). Three respondents are doing shiftwork in the production line. The other 16 respondents are all working in offices spread out across four different work sites.

Table 1: demographic characteristics of the sample

<b>Respondent number (n = 19)</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Function title</b>	<b>Years of employment</b>
1	Female	48	Senior expert	9
2	Female	66	Executive secretary	42
3	Female	52	External communications officer	26
4	Female	30	Administrative employee	1
5	Male	52	Program Director	28
6	Male	53	Senior Scientist	25
7	Male	53	Process operator	34
8	Male	58	Process Technician	33
9	Female	42	Sustainability Engineer	9
10	Male	53	Production Leader	5
11	Male	59	Senior Pension Consultant	31
12	Male	62	Program Director	30
13	Male	49	Operations Control	16
14	Female	45	Supply Chain Manager	21
15	Male	45	Cluster Manager	6
16	Female	62	User management specialist	42
17	Male	48	Team leader	25
18	Female	42	Director Licensing	16
19	Male	62	Operations Coordinator	41

### 3.3 Instruments

The main instrument used in this research are semi-structured, face-to-face interviews, which are explorative in nature. Semi-structured interviews are conversations that are to some extent free to vary and are likely to change substantially between participants (Fylan, 2005). As opposed to structured interviews where there would be a predetermined list of questions that are covered in the same order for each participant, semi-structured interviews are conducted with help of a topic list –a set of questions that give a general idea on which topics to cover (Fylan, 2005). By undertaking a thorough literature review, a topic guide was developed

beforehand. Using a guideline such as a topic guide with open questions allows for maintaining focus on relevant topics, but also allows for opportunities to stray from the guide when it seems appropriate. This allows new ideas to be brought up during the interview as a result of what the respondents are saying. A topic guide consisting of open questions gives both the researcher and the respondent the flexibility to go into details when needed. Respondents are encouraged to express their views in their own terms (Cohen & Crabtree, 2006).

Achieving reliability in qualitative research can be challenging, since each interview is unique. To make sure this study yields reliable and valid results, a topic guide was followed during each interview. This way interviewer bias was reduced (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003). Each respondent was asked about the same topics. The interviews were also conducted by two different researchers to improve inter-rater reliability. The validity of the interviews mainly rests on the extent to which the respondent's opinions are truly reflected (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003). To maximize the validity of this study, the use of leading questions was avoided and there were no predetermined ideas about what was and was not worth discussing. Moreover, people tend to respond differently depending on how they perceive the interviewer, the so called 'interviewer effect'. Respondents could give socially desirable answers or be dishonest about their experiences. Therefore, it is important to put the respondent at ease before beginning with the interview and ensure their confidentiality (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003). This way, the probability that each respondent gives their true opinion is increased.

### **3.4 Procedure**

The procedure of data collection consists of several steps. First, a topic guide was developed and a research sample was constructed. A list of volunteers for participating in the interviews was created as a result of the advertisement in the company newsletter. This resulted in a relatively large group of potential participants. Then, twenty participants were selected based on multiple characteristics to make sure the sample was as diverse as possible (e.g. attitude, age, gender, function title). The selected participants were approached by email to set an appointment for the interview. Next, semi-structured interviews were conducted at the different work sites during multiple days by two researchers. The average duration of these interviews was approximately one hour. Eighteen interviews were conducted in Dutch, and one in English. At the beginning of each interview, the researcher introduced the research, comforted the respondent, explained the topics being covered in the interview, confirmed the anonymity of

each participant and asked for agreement to record the interview. At the end of the interview, the participants were thanked for their participation. After the interviews were conducted, they were transcribed and analyzed by using the program Atlas.ti for coding, analyzing and interpreting the data.

### **3.5 Analysis**

During the analysis stage, the data from the interviews was sorted, named, categorized and connected (Gelissen, 2010). The responses of the participants were coded and analyzed with help of coding program Atlas.ti. Assumed was that ‘individual-level factors’, ‘context-level factors’ and ‘initiative characteristics’ form the three core code categories. The factors listed under ‘2.4 Employee Engagement in Sustainable Employability Initiatives’ provided the starting subcategories. In the process of open coding at the start of the coding process, every passage of the interview is studied to determine what exactly has been said and to label each passage with an adequate code (Boeije, 2002). Every statement a respondent has given expressing their opinion on engaging in sustainable employability initiatives was given the appropriate label. Then, the interviews are compared in the axial coding stage (Boeije, 2002). The aim of axial coding is to further develop the conceptualization of the subject and to discover the combinations of codes which exist. This produces clusters or a typology (Boeije, 2002). So, in the axial coding stage codes were sorted and corresponding codes were clustered together. These clustered codes formed a factor. A table of three columns was made listing all these factors, how many times they were mentioned by the respondents, and a short explanation with some examples from the interview. This table formed the base of the analysis. During analysis, the subcategories were expanded to include all additional factors that were named during the interviews. Sometimes, respondents were found to mention multiple notions within one factor. They occasionally expressed several opinions on multiple facets of one notion. This is why the focus of analysis in this study was on the number of mentions per notion instead of the number of respondents and their respective opinions. The number of mentions determined the importance of the factors that emerged from the interviews, ranking these from most important to least important. In the final coding stage, a model or pattern of relationships can be developed (Boeije, 2002). In result, a theoretical model of the factors that affect engagement in sustainable employability initiatives was developed, with the order of the factors ranked on importance and an indication if the factors are either a positive or negative influence (or possibly both) on engagement in sustainable employability initiatives.

## Results

### 4.1 Individual-level Factors

**Personality.** Based on theory, we assumed that certain big five personality traits such as openness to experience, extraversion and conscientiousness, influenced motivation to learn and therefore development activity (Major et al., 2006). This means that proactive individuals, who are curious, are open to new challenges, who show ambition and an interest in a healthy lifestyle, would be more inclined to seek out sustainable employability initiatives by their own initiative. Thus, they are probably more likely to participate in initiatives. Only two respondents were explicitly outspoken about their personality. One respondent specifically stated that he is a very curious person and that this is the main reason for him to participate in the initiatives. One other respondent classified herself as a very proactive person. She states that she often approaches other people of her own initiative because she has an internal drive to keep developing herself.

Other respondents did not mention their personality specifically, but rather the need for a necessity of fit between their personality and the activities that are offered. Eight respondents described participating in the initiatives as ‘fun’. They enjoy these kinds of activities and are happy to participate. One respondent finds it very important to stay healthy, active and fit. This is why he participates in various health- and sport centered initiatives, on the condition that it fits in his schedule. On the other hand, six respondents indicated that they simply did not enjoy participating in any sustainable employability initiatives. One respondent said: *“I hate fitness and I hate going on a walk. It is all very personal”*. Based on these statements, employees are more likely to participate in sustainable employability initiatives if these initiatives link up with their personal needs and preferences.

Table 2. Personality. How many times was a certain notion mentioned to be either a positive or negative influence on engagement in sustainable employability initiatives.

Number of mentions	Notion	Orientation
14	Fit between personality (e.g. needs and preferences) and offered activities	8 Positive
		6 Negative
1	Curiosity	Positive
1	Proactivity	Positive

**Learning goal orientation.** Learning-goal oriented individuals are more likely to value opportunities to learn and develop their job-related skills. Individuals high in learning goal orientation display a general desire to keep learning and developing (Hurtz & Williams, 2009). One respondent mentioned that she felt the need for change in her career: *“I did not just want to grow in my current role, I wanted something entirely different”*. This was the root cause for her to participate in sustainable employability initiatives. Three respondents mentioned that whenever their employer provided them with an opportunity to learn or develop, they took it. But this was because they felt it would be a waste not to use it, for instance with the employability voucher. One respondent said: *“if this is just handed to you, why not use it?”* Surprisingly none of the respondents specifically mentioned an internal drive to learn. However, one respondent repeatedly stressed that he did not need to participate in any initiatives, because he felt like he was doing just fine on his own. He said: *“so I do not do things like following courses or things like that. Or improve myself. I also feel that I, I say that to my boss and he does not respond to that, but that I'm overqualified for what I do”*. He also stated: *“Well, it's not necessary because I think, in my mind, I'm already very sustainable employable”*. Concluding from these statements, employees are more likely to participate in sustainable employability initiatives if they are high in learning-goal orientation.

Table 3. Learning goal orientation. How many times was a certain notion mentioned to be either a positive or negative influence on engagement in sustainable employability initiatives.

Number of mentions	Notion	Orientation
3	Take opportunities offered	Positive
1	No improvement possible	Negative
1	Need for change	Positive

**Self-efficacy.** Individuals with high levels of self-efficacy are more likely to choose to participate in challenging assignments and take responsibility for personal development (Maurer et al., 2003). However, there were no respondents who indicated that they participated in the activities because they believed in their abilities to grow or because they were convinced that they can reach their learning outcomes. It seems that self-efficacy has no effect on employee engagement in sustainable employability initiatives.

**Age.** As people age, the topic of developing their sustainable employability becomes more important to them. Seven respondents mentioned age in their interview. Four respondents of higher than average age mentioned being worried about their level of sustainable employability. For example, one employee said: *“What I am doing now, I do not see myself doing when I am 60, that just is not possible. For me and many others”*. Three other respondents expressed being future-oriented. They worry about the future and if they will be able to still go on as they have now. One of these respondents specifically worried about physical restraints on the job that come with increasing age. Three other employees mentioned the difference in interest in sustainable employability initiatives between younger and older employees. They stress that their younger coworkers are not thinking about these subjects yet. While one respondent close to retiring said that if she had been ten or twenty years younger, she would be more inclined to participate in these initiatives. Now, she is just in another phase of her life. Based on these statements, employees are more likely to participate in sustainable employability initiatives if they are worried about ageing affecting their sustainable employability.

Table 5. Age. How many times was a certain notion mentioned to be either a positive or negative influence on engagement in sustainable employability initiatives.

Number of mentions	Notion	Orientation
4	Worried about ageing	Positive
3	Age difference	Negative
3	Future-oriented	Positive
1	Age constraints	Negative
1	Physical restraints due to ageing	Positive

#### 4.1.1 Additional emerging factors.

**Cause/Trigger.** Another individual-level factor that became apparent through the interviews can best be described as a *cause*, or a specific *trigger*, that employees need to become aware that they want to make a change. In total, six respondents pointed out that a specific event made them more aware about their sustainable employability. Different examples of such events were mentioned. One respondent said: *“something has to happen before they want to go [to a certain activity]. For example, an issue at work or a poor job review”*. A different

respondent decided to participate in a mindfulness training because things at work were very hectic. These work-related events are summarized under the notion ‘work-related trigger’. Another respondent mentioned having a shoulder injury and this is how she was referred to the vitality center. Also struggling with a burn-out was mentioned by two respondents. These examples refer to employees’ health (e.g. ‘health-related trigger’ in table 6). Thus, employees are more likely to participate in sustainable employability initiatives if they experience a certain triggering event to make them aware of their sustainable employability.

Table 6. Cause/Trigger. How many times was a certain notion mentioned to be either a positive or negative influence on engagement in sustainable employability initiatives.

Number of mentions	Notion	Orientation
3	Work-related trigger	Positive
3	Health-related trigger	Positive

**Education.** Education was also mentioned by two respondents. One respondent believed that higher educated employees already are more occupied with their health and fitness. In addition, the other respondent believed that higher educated employees have a better view of their career and therefore a better career perspective regarding the future. In conclusion, higher educated employees are more likely to participate in sustainable employability initiatives.

Table 7. Education. How many times was a certain notion mentioned to be either a positive or negative influence on engagement in sustainable employability initiatives.

Number of mentions	Notion	Orientation
1	Focused on health and fitness	Positive
1	Career perspective	Positive

**Work-life balance.** Seven respondents indicated that they wanted their work and private life to be separated. All these respondents agree that they prefer doing certain activities in their private time instead of in a work context. Most of them like to work out in their spare time, but they don’t want to do this at work. One of these respondents specifically declared that work was a place for working, and nothing more. Concluding from these statements, employees who

prefer work and private life to be separated are less likely to engage in sustainable employability initiatives.

Table 8. Work-life balance. How many times was a certain notion mentioned to be either a positive or negative influence on engagement in sustainable employability initiatives.

Number of mentions	Notion	Orientation
7	Separation work and private life	Negative

When summing the mentions of notions on different factors, a ranked overview of the most important factors can be created. Some factors are constructed of different notions which can either be seen as positive or negative. Therefore, the orientation of these factors is classified as positive/negative.

Table 9. Overview of individual-level factors ranked on importance.

Number of mentions	Factor	Orientation
16	Personality	Positive/Negative*
12	Age	Positive/Negative*
7	Work-life balance	Negative
6	Cause/Trigger	Positive
4	Learning-goal orientation	Positive/Negative*
2	Education	Positive
0	Self-efficacy	-

\* Some factors are made up of different notions which can be seen as either a positive or negative influence.



## 4.2 Context-level Factors

**Perceived benefits and barriers.** One of the most mentioned barriers for employees to participate in sustainable employability initiatives is time. Whether it is the lack of time or the bad timing of the initiatives taking place, eight respondents indicated that time has been an issue. Two of these respondents who are doing shift work said it was often impossible to participate in initiatives because of their working hours. Another two of these eight respondents indicated that participating in initiatives in their free time is a problem for them. They would prefer it to take place during working hours. The remaining four respondents said that it simply did not fit in their time schedule (anymore). Another limiting factor is the high workload. Eight respondents mentioned that they would pass up on participating in initiatives if they are too busy with work. As one respondent said: “*now, we all are a little inclined to say, if we are too busy, it's not going to happen today*”. Therefore, employees who experience barriers such as time and high workload are less likely to engage in sustainable employability initiatives.

Only one respondent stressed that it should be made clear what the benefits are for employees who participate in initiatives. He suggests that someone needs to come in and give a presentation on the benefits that employees stand to gain from participating. He adds that this might increase employees’ motivation to participate. Interestingly, no other respondents mentioned any benefits that they might have experienced resulting from participating in sustainable employability interventions. For the purpose of creating a more comprehensive theoretical model of influential factors, *perceived benefits and barriers* will be split up into two separate factors from now on, namely *perceived barriers* and *perceived benefits*.

Table 10. Perceived benefits and barriers. How many times was a certain notion mentioned to be either a positive or negative influence on engagement in sustainable employability initiatives.

Number of mentions	Notion	Orientation
8	Barrier: time	Negative
8	Barrier: workload	Negative
1	More attention to benefits	Positive

**Perceived support.** Twelve respondents valued support from coworkers. Especially with sports-based initiatives, coworkers often persuade employees to participate. One of these twelve respondents stressed the importance of having a buddy to go to sports programs with. Another

of these respondents mentioned the increase of coherence within the group due to coworkers entering a competition where they have to walk a certain amount of steps as a group. However, there was one respondent who indicated that participating in any initiatives with coworkers would be a hindering factor. She did not want to do any fitness related activities when coworkers would be around, in fear of them seeing her sweat.

Six respondents mentioned supervisory support as a very important motivating factor. One respondent said: *“I think it’s really our leaders that stimulate and ask you about what do you do about sports, or what do you do about your food”*. They state that the supervisor is an important role model. If your supervisor values sustainable employability and actively supports you in these initiatives, employees are more likely to participate. In contrast, lack of supervisory support was also mentioned as a negative influential factor by six respondents. When their supervisor does not support them in taking time during working hours to engage in various initiatives, they experience this as a hindering factor. So overall, the presence of supervisory support would be a positive influential factor if all respondents were to experience sufficient support from their supervisor. Based on these statements, employees who experience sufficient coworker and supervisory support are generally more likely to engage in sustainable employability initiatives.

Table 11. Perceived support. How many times was a certain notion mentioned to be either a positive or negative influence on engagement in sustainable employability initiatives.

Number of mentions	Notion	Orientation
13	Coworker support	12 Positive 1 Negative
12	Supervisory support	12 Positive

***Insecurity.*** Recently the organization where the respondents are employed went through a reorganization. Three respondents mentioned being insecure about their current position. One respondent said: *“in this time of reorganization people are scared to put their cards on the table and bring up certain things to their employer”*. People who maybe want to make a change in their job keep this to themselves in fear of maybe losing their job. They are afraid of how their employer would react to them wanting a change. Thus, employees who experience job insecurity are less likely to engage in sustainable employability initiatives.

Table 12. Insecurity. How many times was a certain notion mentioned to be either a positive or negative influence on engagement in sustainable employability initiatives.

Number of mentions	Notion	Orientation
3	Job insecurity	Negative

#### 4.2.1 Additional emerging factors.

**Culture.** A factor which was not an initial influential factor, but emerged from the interviews is *culture*. Two respondents indicated that the organization should have a true, authentic, genuine vision for employees to be more motivated to invest in their sustainable employability. Sustainable employability should be a core value within the organization, just like safety is a core value now. Therefore, employees would be more likely to engage in sustainable employability initiatives if sustainable employability was a core value within the organization.

Table 13. Culture. How many times was a certain notion mentioned to be either a positive or negative influence on engagement in sustainable employability initiatives.

Number of mentions	Notion	Orientation
2	Core value of company culture	Positive

**Costs.** Another emerged factor is *costs*. One respondent stressed that an important motivating factor for him was the opportunity to participate in the initiatives without having to pay for it yourself. If he had to pay the costs, or even a part of the costs, he would not have participated in any interventions.

Table 14. Costs. How many times was a certain notion mentioned to be either a positive or negative influence on engagement in sustainable employability initiatives.

Number of mentions	Notion	Orientation
1	Free participation	Positive

Summing the mentions of notions on different factors creates a ranked overview of the most important factors. *Perceived support* is constructed of different notions which can either be seen as positive or negative. Therefore, its orientation is described as positive/negative.

Table 15. Overview of context-level factors ranked on importance.

Number of mentions	Factor	Orientation
25	Perceived support	Positive/Negative*
16	Perceived barriers	Negative
3	Insecurity	Negative
2	Culture	Positive
1	Costs	Positive
1	Perceived benefits	Positive

\* Some factors are made up of different notions which can be seen as either a positive or negative influence.

### 4.3 Initiative characteristics

**Promotion and visibility.** Six respondents mentioned a lack of information (i.e. visibility). This can be linked to promotion of the initiatives. One of these respondents said: *“maybe there is something really fun going on now, and my schedule would allow me to go, but I just don’t know about it”*. Three respondents said they would benefit from more promotion and visibility of initiatives being offered. As one of these three respondents said: *“I need a visual trigger. If I don’t get stimulated I just stay sitting around”*. Another respondent suggested more publicity: *“so more success referrals, ordinary people who talk about it and make it visible in our internal communication”*. Five respondents said that they are not familiar with the current initiatives being offered. They blame it on the lack of visibility and promotion within the organization, however this differs per location. On one worksite there are monitors in the hallways displaying current programs. Based on these statements, increased promotion and visibility will lead to more employee engagement in sustainable employability initiatives, while lack of information causes employees to be less engaged in sustainable employability initiatives.

Table 16. Promotion and visibility. How many times was a certain notion mentioned to be either a positive or negative influence on engagement in sustainable employability initiatives.

Number of mentions	Notion	Orientation
6	Lack of information	Negative
5	Not familiar with current events	Negative
3	Increase promotion and visibility	Positive
1	More publicity	Positive

***The right initiatives.*** Sustainable employability initiatives should be worthwhile. Failed initiatives in the past will likely result in negative attitudes and intentions toward future participation in those initiatives. Three respondents found that bad experiences with previous initiatives lead them to stop participating in future activities. One respondent said: *“I think this program has been developed in a kind of ivory tower, but there is not a very thoughtful implementation plan behind it”*. Another respondent states: *“the problem that most people have is that they, like me, have been here for years. We have seen so many new things. Most of us are numb to it. Again something new. What does it yield for us? We don’t know”*. Another respondent also mentioned lack of stability: *“they start something, but the implementation is lacking, or they do not communicate or they quit halfway through”*. These respondents lost confidence in the initiatives due to poor implementation. To conclude, poor implementation of initiatives leads to less employee engagement in sustainable employability initiatives. However, this means that ‘good implementation’ must yield a positive effect on employee engagement in return. Choosing and implementing the right initiatives in a correct manner will result in a positive orientation towards engaging in sustainable employability initiatives. For the purpose of creating a more comprehensive theoretical model of influential factors, *the right initiatives* will therefore have a positive orientation.

Table 17. The right initiatives. How many times was a certain notion mentioned to be either a positive or negative influence on engagement in sustainable employability initiatives.

Number of mentions	Notion	Orientation
3	Good implementation	Positive

**Voluntary participation.** Three respondents stressed the importance of voluntary participation in these initiatives. However, two respondents indicated a fine line between being stimulated to participate in the initiatives and being pushed. One respondent mentions that he feels like it is frowned upon if you do not participate. Another respondent said that the minute the organization would decide to commit targets to it, he would stop participating. This is in line with the following remark from another respondent: “*if it is forced you must follow it and you put targets on the people, no. That doesn’t work, but if you create the culture, that this is important and that this is beneficial for you as a human being and as an employee, yeah this works*”. Thus, employees who experience participation to be voluntary are more likely to engage in sustainable employability initiatives, while employees who feel like they are obliged to participate are less likely to engage in sustainable employability initiatives.

Table 18. Voluntary participation. How many times was a certain notion mentioned to be either a positive or negative influence on engagement in sustainable employability initiatives.

Number of mentions	Notion	Orientation
3	Voluntary participation	Positive
3	Feeling obliged to participate	Negative
2	Putting targets on people	Negative

#### 4.3.1 Additional emerging factors.

**Trial.** A factor which was not an initial influential factor, but emerged from the interviews is *trial*. Four respondents indicated that they liked it when they got an opportunity to first try something out before they had to commit to participating in an intervention. For example, when they received an employability voucher of 500 euros, they could spend this voucher on an introduction to a course to try it out first. This means that employees who have the opportunity to try something out first before having to commit to it, are more likely to engage in sustainable employability initiatives.

Table 19. Trial. How many times was a certain notion mentioned to be either a positive or negative influence on engagement in sustainable employability initiatives.

Number of mentions	Notion	Orientation
4	Try something out first	Positive

**Competition element.** Another emerging factor that was mentioned by four respondents was related to the Global Challenge. In teams of seven, you have to compete with other teams within your organization. Each team gets Fitbits which count how many steps you take during a day. The team that has the most collective steps taken wins the competition. One respondent said this form of team-bonding leads to increased commitment and engagement at work. All four respondents enjoyed participating in this Global Challenge and called it fun because of the internal competition among coworkers. To conclude, if sustainable employability initiatives have a competition element, employees are more likely to engage in these initiatives.

Table 20. Competition element. How many times was a certain notion mentioned to be either a positive or negative influence on engagement in sustainable employability initiatives.

Number of mentions	Notion	Orientation
4	Competition with other teams	Positive

**Accessibility.** This is another emerging factor. Three respondents said that accessibility of the location of the initiatives could be both a motivating and a hindering factor for engaging in sustainable employability initiatives. Most employees are not willing to drive to another location. If these initiatives take place at their worksite, respondents said they were more likely to participate in the initiatives. Furthermore, when it gets a bit difficult for employees to participate they are likely to quickly give up. For example, when employees first have to register at the reception desk and physically pick up a key for the fitness room at their worksite, they often find this too much of a hassle. So this means that close proximity and easy access would be a positive influence on engagement in sustainable employability initiatives.

Table 21. Accessibility. How many times was a certain notion mentioned to be either a positive or negative influence on engagement in sustainable employability initiatives.

Number of mentions	Notion	Orientation
2	Close proximity	Positive
1	Easy access	Positive

Summing the mentions of notions on different factors creates a ranked overview of the most important factors. Table 22 displays this ranked overview of all initiative characteristics.

Table 22. Overview of initiative characteristics ranked on importance.

Number of mentions	Factor	Orientation
15	Promotion and visibility	Positive/Negative*
8	Voluntary participation	Positive/Negative*
4	Trial	Positive
4	Competition element	Positive
3	Accessibility	Positive
3	The right initiatives	Positive

\* Some factors are made up of different notions which can be seen as either a positive or negative influence.

In the following table, the top most mentioned influential factors are given. These factors are assumed to be the most important factors influencing engagement in sustainable employability initiatives, based on their number of mentions. In Appendix II, a table containing a more elaborate overview of all individual-level factors, context-level factors and initiative characteristics discussed above and their respective notions within each factor can be found.

Table 23. Top most mentioned individual-level factors, context-level factors and initiative characteristics.

Factor	Number of mentions	Orientation
<b>Individual-level factors</b>		
Personality	16	Positive/Negative*
Age	12	Positive/Negative*
<b>Context-level factors</b>		
Perceived support	25	Positive/Negative*
Perceived barriers	16	Negative
<b>Initiative characteristics</b>		
Promotion and visibility	15	Positive/Negative*
Voluntary participation	8	Positive/Negative*

\* Some factors are made up of different notions which can be seen as either a positive or negative influence.



#### 4.4 Employer responsibility vs. employee responsibility

**Employee responsibility.** Six respondents stressed that maintaining your sustainable employability is your own responsibility. One respondent said: *“you should take action yourself or else nothing will happen. It is your own responsibility. Don’t think your boss is going to arrange everything for you. You should come up with a proposal, be proactive, and have a clear vision of what you want and what you need to achieve this”*. Most of these respondents agree that maintaining one’s sustainable employability should be done in their own way. The employer should not intervene in this. One respondent remarked that not all employees are ready to handle this much responsibility and freedom. She said: *“they don’t see the fact when you empower people, not everybody is ready to take the power, to see the opportunity”*. Out of the six respondents who said this is the responsibility of the employee, half is positively oriented towards sustainable employability initiatives at work, and half negatively. The three respondents with a negative orientation prefer work and private life to be separated.

**Shared responsibility.** Nine respondents agreed that there is a shared responsibility between employee and employer. You have an own responsibility to stay fit, but the employer should take on a facilitating role in this process. The employer has a responsibility to offer sufficient opportunities to keep developing sustainable employability. As one respondent puts it: *“it is a shared responsibility. The organization can ask you to participate in initiatives, but you can always say no”*. Out of these nine respondents, four have a positive orientation towards sustainable employability initiatives at work. They appreciate the organization offering them certain opportunities and they gladly take them. Five of these respondents have a negative orientation. Most of these respondents do not want to participate in any initiatives or they do not see the need to do so. These respondents do not experience a fit between their personality, needs and preferences, and the offered initiatives by their employer.

**Employer responsibility.** Only one respondent found this to be the sole responsibility of the employer. He states: *“businesswise, it is their responsibility. Maximizing performance without going over the top, that is the responsibility of the organization”*. He experienced a positive orientation towards sustainable employability initiatives at work.

**Societal responsibility.** One respondent thought it was the responsibility of the society that we live in. He mentioned sustainable employability being a political issue within the Netherlands. The government should regulate sustainable employability standards for organizations. This respondent did not participate in any sustainable employability initiatives

and did not have any desire to do so in the future. Therefore, he has a negative general orientation towards these initiatives.

In the following table, an overview is given of the number of respondents and their respective opinions regarding this responsibility issue. Unlike in the previous tables, ‘orientation’ here is based on the respondent’s general orientation towards sustainable employability initiatives, since they do not explicitly express positive or negative feelings towards their level of responsibility. This way, the level of responsibility can be linked to the respondents’ overall attitudes towards sustainable employability initiatives.

Table 23. Employer responsibility vs. employee responsibility. How many respondents expressed an opinion on this responsibility matter and what is their general orientation towards sustainable employability initiatives.

Number of respondents (N = 19)	Opinion	Orientation*
9	Shared responsibility	4 Positive
		5 Negative
6	Employee responsibility	3 Positive
		3 Negative
1	Employer responsibility	1 Positive
1	Societal responsibility	1 Negative
2	No opinion	-

\* Orientation is focused on the respondent’s general orientation towards engaging in sustainable employability initiatives.

#### 4.5 A theoretical model of engagement in sustainable employability initiatives

As a result of the information gathered from the interviews, a theoretical model of factors that affect engagement in sustainable employability initiatives was developed. This model describes the individual-level factors, context-level factors and initiative characteristics that were initially derived from theory about engagement in development activities. From the interviews it became apparent that all these factors indeed contribute to engagement in sustainable employability initiatives. In addition, factors such as *work-life balance*, *cause/trigger*, *education*, *culture*, *costs*, *trial*, *competition element* and *accessibility* also emerged. However, some of these factors were only mentioned once or twice (i.e. education, self-efficacy, culture, costs, and perceived benefits). Since these factors have a relatively small influence, they were not included in the final theoretical model. The factors that were mentioned at least three or more times were included in the model. These factors are assumed to influence employees' willingness and motivation to participate in sustainable employability initiatives offered by their employer, in a positive or negative way (or possibly both). To accentuate the importance of the factors with the largest influence, the factors are ranked from most important at the top, to least important at the bottom. The importance of the factors is based on how many times this factor was mentioned across all interviews. To distinguish the most influential factors, a cutoff point had to be established. Factors which were mentioned seven or more times (one third of the number of respondents) were considered to be the most influential factors in this study. These factors are written in bold in the theoretical model to further accentuate their importance.

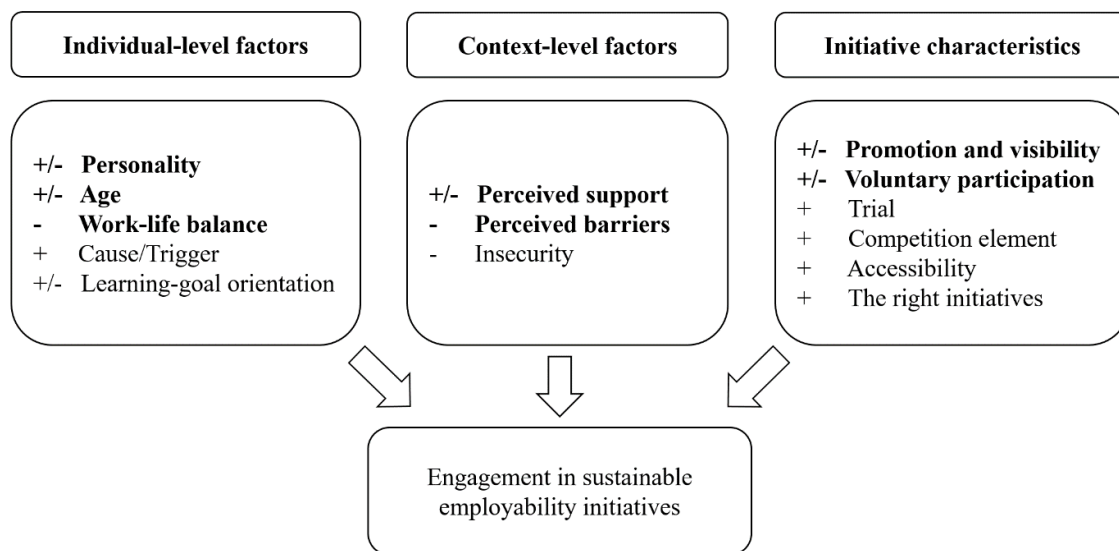


Figure 2: A theoretical model of engagement in sustainable employability initiatives

## Discussion

This exploratory study aims to answer the question of what exactly motivates employees to engage in sustainable employability initiatives. There is not much existing scientific literature on the topic of influential factors that affect employee engagement in sustainable employability initiatives yet. To construct a baseline of factors which might influence engagement in sustainable employability initiatives, other available literature and theory on factors which influence employee engagement in development activities was used (Maurer et al., 2003; Hurtz & Williams, 2009). As a result, these factors were grouped into individual-level factors, context-level factors, and initiative characteristics for the purpose of this study. Within the individual-level factors, the level of fit between employees' personality (e.g. their needs and preferences) and offered sustainable employability initiatives by the organization was shown to be the most important influence on engagement in these initiatives. Respondents indicated that they had to have a personal interest (e.g. enjoyment) in these initiatives for them to engage in these initiatives. At the context-level, perceived support was shown to be the most important. Supervisory support can be a great positive influence on engagement in initiatives, but when supervisory support is lacking this causes a negative influence in turn. Support from coworkers was greatly appreciated by the majority of the respondents and yields a predominantly positive orientation towards engagement in sustainable employability initiatives. The most important initiative characteristic was promotion and visibility. Currently, respondents do not always know which initiatives are being offered. By directing more efforts towards promotion and visibility, more employees will be aware of the initiatives.

On the individual-level, the most discrepancies were found between the initial factors found in scientific literature and the actual results of this study. Big five personality traits such as openness to experience, extraversion and conscientiousness (Major et al., 2006) were only discussed two times during the interviews. This could be because respondents are often not aware of their personality traits and experience difficulty in clearly explaining them. Instead, many respondents stressed the importance of a certain level of fit between their needs and preferences and the offered initiatives. Most respondents expressed this as 'liking' the initiatives, thinking they are 'fun' and enjoying participating in them. Respondents with an opposite view voiced this as 'it being not for them'. In addition, learning-goal orientation (Hurtz & Williams, 2009) and self-efficacy (Maurer et al., 2003) were shown to be less important influential factors. Instead, work-life balance was often mentioned by respondents as a negative influence on engagement in sustainable employability initiatives, without this being one of the

initial influential factors considered. These respondents emphasized the importance of a clear separation between work and private life. They preferred to participate in any sustainable employability activities in their private life in their own way. The discrepancies between the theoretical foundation of this study and the actual findings could be explained by a variety of causes, where the sample in this study is probably the main cause. Therefore, the findings in this study are only representative for the single organization studied. Care should be taken in generalizing these findings to other organizations, in different sectors and countries.

The results of this study closely agree with the initial context-level factors and initiative characteristics which influence employee engagement in other development activities (Maurer et al., 2003; Hurtz & Williams, 2009). Perceived support and perceived barriers are indeed important context-level influential factors in employee engagement in sustainable employability initiatives (Noe & Wilk, 1993; Maurer et al., 2003). However, perceived benefits was found to be less important in this study. A possible explanation for this could be that a relatively large group of respondents experienced insufficient resources to do their work (e.g. lack of time to meet deadlines). These respondents are likely to devote most of their time, attention, and energy to trying to complete daily work assignments (Noe & Wilk, 1993), instead of devoting time to engage in sustainable employability initiatives. Therefore, they might not be aware of any benefits. Promotion and visibility, and voluntary participation, were shown to be important initiative characteristics influencing employee engagement in sustainable employability initiatives (Hurtz & Williams, 2009). However, the right initiatives ranked least important in this category. This could be explained due to the low amount of respondents with actual experience with previous initiatives. Only a handful of respondents participated regularly in sustainable employability initiatives and therefore they were the only ones which could comment on the quality of the initiatives. All of the emerging factors resulting from the interviews, together with the initial individual-level, context-level factors and initiative characteristics, were integrated in the theoretical model of engagement in sustainable employability initiatives (Figure 2). This model shows all relevant factors that contribute to employee engagement in sustainable employability initiatives and their orientation, ranked from most important to least important, answering the first three sub research questions.

The last sub research question relates to the topic of employer responsibility vs. employee responsibility on sustainable employability development and how it affects employee engagement in sustainable employability initiatives. Most employees agree that working on one's sustainable employability is a shared responsibility between themselves and their

employer. Employees should take action and have a clear vision of what they want to achieve, and the employer should take on a facilitating role in this process and has to offer their employees enough opportunities to keep developing their sustainable employability. However, this point of view of employees having a responsibility towards themselves to develop their sustainable employability does not automatically mean that it will lead to more engagement in initiatives. The amount of positive and negative orientations towards sustainable employability initiatives in general is almost equally distributed. This leads to believe that the feeling of having responsibility does not influence employees' opinion about sustainable employability initiatives. With employees having responsibility, control or autonomy to choose whether or not they should participate in sustainable employability initiatives, also comes the freedom to choose not to participate. Employees who expressed no interest in these initiatives, or who experience certain constraints that prevent them from participating, have the freedom to discard engaging in sustainable employability initiatives. One of the respondents remarked during her interview that not all employees are ready to handle this much responsibility and freedom. She said: *"they don't see the fact when you empower people, not everybody is ready to take the power, to see the opportunity"*. So when the aim is to increase employee engagement in sustainable employability initiatives, instead of providing employees with responsibility, control or autonomy in this choice, more efforts should be directed to making initiatives more attractive to employees and providing them with enough support for them to be able to take the time to participate in any interventions. This corresponds to earlier statements saying that sustainable employability requires both a supportive work environment and employees with the attitude and motivation to explore and develop their capabilities (Van der Klink et al., 2016).

### **Limitations and future research**

Probably the principal limitation of this study is the sample. The respondents in this study are all employed at the same organization. However, even though the respondents all work for the same organization, they vary greatly in demographic characteristics and work sites. When constructing the sample, careful attention was paid to diversify the sample as much as possible to get the most representative results. In addition, the sample consisted of respondents who reacted to an advertisement in the company newsletter. These respondents all showed an interest in the topic of sustainable employability development. Since this form of convenience sampling was used, the results of this study cannot be generalized to the target population because of

potential bias in this sampling method due to under-representation of subgroups in the sample compared to the population (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003). Therefore, inferences based on this study can only be made about this particular sample. In result, future research should focus on mapping engagement in sustainable employability initiatives throughout various sectors, countries and across many varying organizations. As mentioned earlier, certain discrepancies between the theoretical foundation of this study and the actual findings due to a number of causes, such as the contents of the sample, make this study only representative for the one organization studied. Care should be taken in generalizing these findings.

Another possible limitation of this study is the reliability of the interviews. By conducting semi-structured interviews while using a topic guide with predefined questions, the results of this study should be comparable between respondents. However, during the interviews some respondents tended to stray away from the question asked by the interviewer, and get lost in their own narrative. While the interviewers followed the questions on the topic guide, the freedom to deviate from the original question due to the semi-structured design of the interviews, might have influenced the reliability of this study (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003). For future research, the combination of semi-structured interviews and a survey is recommended. The use of a survey yields more reliable results compared to qualitative research. Using a combination of qualitative and quantitative research methods will lead to a richer and more comprehensive understanding of engagement in sustainable employability initiatives. For example, an interesting research opportunity would be the use of a personality test to study the effect of personality on engagement in sustainable employability initiatives in more detail, since in this study most respondents were not aware of their exact personality traits.

This exploratory study provides various opportunities for future research. For instance, future research could focus on expanding and further validating the theoretical model that was developed in this study. This theoretical model of factors that influence engagement in sustainable employability initiatives can be used to test more specific hypotheses in a different context. For example, future research can be focused on how much exactly these factors each influence employee engagement in sustainable employability initiatives by conducting quantitative research. In addition, the results of this study showed discrepancies between individual-level factors found in scientific literature and the actual results of this study. It is important to further investigate if this is truly the case. Future research should increase respondents' awareness of their personality characteristics and degree of learning-goal orientation and self-efficacy to accurately investigate this effect on engagement in sustainable

employability initiatives. Lastly, the topic of employer responsibility vs. employee responsibility on sustainable employability development and how it affects employee engagement in sustainable employability initiatives could be further explored. The amount of positive and negative orientations towards sustainable employability initiatives in general is almost equally distributed and leads to believe that the feeling of having responsibility does not influence employees' orientation towards sustainable employability initiatives. This is interesting because previous scientific research on employees having responsibility, control or autonomy to make decisions suggests that having responsibility would lead to increased engagement. Therefore, future research is necessary to further explore this issue.

### **Scientific and practical implications**

This study makes an important contribution to scientific research on sustainable employability development. Since sustainable employability is a relatively new topic which only recently received considerable attention within the scientific literature, exploratory research is needed to acquire new insights and to ultimately generate formal hypotheses. Because of the novelty of this topic, qualitative research can best be used to give an indication as to 'how' and 'why' something occurs, as opposed to 'how often'. This study expanded on existing factors which influence employee engagement in development activities, by dividing them in individual-level factors, context-level factors and initiative characteristics and adding factors resulting from the interviews. In result, a theoretical model was developed which in turn can be used in future research testing more specific hypotheses in a different context.

Practical implications of these findings are that organizations could apply these results to improve their implementation of sustainable employability initiatives within the organization. Organizations nowadays invest considerable time, effort and resources in sustainable employability initiatives because they believe investing in the sustainable employability of their employees would be highly beneficial to the organization (Gründemann & de Vries, 2002). However, this raises the question of how to properly motivate employees to actually participate in these initiatives. By taking into account the most important individual-level factors, context-level factors and initiative characteristics found in this study, organizations who attempt to increase engagement in sustainable employability initiatives know where exactly to direct their efforts. As a starting point, organizations should make sustainable employability initiatives more attractive for employees so that their needs and



preferences align with the design of the initiatives. To find out what exactly employees want, organizations can make use of a survey for example. They should give employees a voice to express their feedback on sustainable employability initiatives so that these are better aligned with their preferences. In addition, organizations should provide employees with enough (supervisory) support for them to take the time to engage in sustainable employability initiatives. Lastly, organizations should direct more efforts towards the promotion of existing sustainable employability initiatives and make these more visible to all employees. Employees have to know about initiatives in order for them to actually engage in them. Organizations can make use of promotion of initiatives on the intranet or put up posters for example. It is important to make sure that employees know where they can find information if they are looking for it.

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## **Appendix I**

Interview topic guide in Dutch

### **Topic guide interviews vitaliteit**

#### **Introductie**

- Voorstellen
- Doelen van het onderzoek: duurzame inzetbaarheid (wat werkt, wat werkt niet? / hoe kunnen we enthousiasme onder sommige medewerker verklaren? / inzichten verkrijgen om programma's en interventies te verbeteren)
- Toestemming vragen om gesprek op te nemen (voor onderzoek)
- Wijzen op anonimiteit van het onderzoek: Wij zullen bij het terugkoppelen van de resultaten geen uitspraken maken over specifieke personen. We gaan op zoek naar generieke patronen in de antwoorden (bv. "Drie personen gaven aan dat...")

#### **Achtergrondinformatie**

1. Wat is uw functie binnen deze organisatie?
2. Wat zijn uw werkzaamheden?
3. Hoe lang bent u al werkzaam bij deze organisatie?

#### **Vitaliteit/duurzame inzetbaarheid op de werkvloer**

4. Wat betekent vitaliteit/duurzame inzetbaarheid voor u?
  - a. Vind u dit onderwerp persoonlijk belangrijk? Waarom wel/niet?
  - b. Op welke manier geeft u zelf invulling aan een gezond/vitaal leven?
  - c. In hoe verre vindt u het de verantwoordelijkheid van de werkgever om te zorgen dat werknemers gezond / vitaal leven?
5. Hebt u het gevoel dat vitaliteit/duurzame inzetbaarheid een belangrijk onderwerp is binnen deze organisatie? Waarom wel/niet?

6. Bent u bekend met...

- a. ...het vitaliteitsbeleid van deze organisatie?
- b. ...enkele initiatieven die in het kader van het vitaliteitsbeleid worden aangeboden (*noem voorbeelden zoals worklife center, inzetbaarheidstest, rookbeleid, sportfaciliteiten, aanbod kantine*)

Zo ja, op welke manier bent u op de hoogte gesteld van het beleid / enkele initiatieven?

7. Heeft u zelf wel eens deelgenomen aan (gebruik gemaakt van) een van de initiatieven in het kader van het vitaliteitsprogramma? (*Noem voorbeelden*) Waarom wel/niet?

*Vraag door:*

- a. *Zo ja:* Wat waren de meest belangrijke **motiverende** factoren om mee te doen aan dit programma? (*bijvoorbeeld persoonlijke motivatie om gezond te leven, familie/vrienden, collega's, leidinggevendenden*)
- b. *Zo niet:* Wat waren de meest belangrijke **belemmerende** factoren? (*bijvoorbeeld gebrek aan informatie, onaantrekkelijk aanbod initiatieven, hoge werkdruk, negatieve werksfeer, gebrek aan steun door collega's / leidinggevende*)
- c. Wat zou u motiveren om in de toekomst (weer) mee te doen aan het programma?
- d. Bent u tevreden over de mogelijkheden die uw werkgever biedt op het gebied van vitaliteit?
- e. Vindt u dat u voldoende gestimuleerd wordt op het gebied van vitaliteit en gezondheid op de werkvloer? Waarom wel/niet?

→ Vindt u soms wellicht zelf dat u vanuit de organisatie in te sterke mate gestimuleerd wordt op het gebied van vitaliteit (denk bijvoorbeeld aan het rookbeleid)

8. In hoeverre doen uw collega's mee aan het programma?

9. In hoe verre doet uw manager mee aan het programma?



10. Is vitaliteit bij u op het werk goed bespreekbaar? Waarom wel / niet?

- a. Weet u waar u terecht kunt met vragen over vitaliteit en gezondheid binnen uw bedrijf?
- b. Praat u met uw manager over het onderwerp vitaliteit en een gezonde leefstijl? Waarom wel / niet? (*doorvragen over openheid voor het onderwerp en algemene relatie tussen leiding en medewerker*)
- c. Praat u met uw collega's over het onderwerp vitaliteit en een gezonde leefstijl? Waarom wel / niet?

Bedanken voor het interview / Interesse in resultaten?

## Appendix II

The complete overview of individual-level factors, context-level factors and initiative characteristics.

Factors	Mentions	Notions	Orientation
<b>Individual-level factors</b>			
Personality	14	Fit between personality (e.g. needs and preferences) and activities	8 Positive
			6 Negative
			1 Positive
Age	4	Worried about ageing	1 Proactivity
			1 Positive
			3 Worried about ageing
			3 Age difference
			3 Future-oriented
			1 Age constraints
Work-life balance	7	Separation work and private life	1 Physical restraints due to ageing
			1 Positive
Cause/Trigger	3	Work-related trigger	7 Separation work and private life
			3 Health-related trigger
Learning-goal orientation	3	Take opportunities offered	3 Work-related trigger
			1 No improvement possible
Education	1	Focused on health and fitness	1 Need for change
			1 Positive
Self-efficacy	0	-	1 Career perspective
			0 -

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**Context-level factors**

Perceived support	13	Coworker support	12 Positive
			1 Negative
	12	Supervisory support	12 Positive
Perceived barriers	8	Time	Negative
	8	Workload	Negative
Insecurity	3	Job insecurity	Negative
Culture	2	Core value of company culture	Positive
Costs	1	Free participation	Positive
Perceived benefits	1	More attention to benefits	Positive

**Initiative characteristics**

Promotion and visibility	6	Lack of information	Negative
	5	Not familiar with current events	Negative
	3	Increase promotion and visibility	Positive
	1	More publicity	Positive
Voluntary participation	3	Voluntary participation	Positive
	3	Feeling like you have to participate	Negative
	2	Putting targets on people	Negative
Trial	4	Try something out first	Positive
Competition element	4	Competition with other teams	Positive
Accessibility	2	Close proximity	Positive
	1	Easy access	Positive
The right initiatives	3	Poor implementation	Negative

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