

IS WHAT'S PAST PROLOGUE? A REVIEW AND AGENDA FOR CONTEMPORARY EMPLOYABILITY RESEARCH

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Employability, which is commonly conceptualized as one's ability to realize job opportunities within and between employers over time, has attracted considerable attention from diverse academic disciplines for decades. Research in these disciplines has largely evolved independent of other fields, thus limiting the accumulation, validation, advancement, and utility of employability. Two central stakeholders in much of this research are employers and employees, yet the vast majority of studies since the year 2000 have failed to explicitly consider this interdependence, instead being characterized by an overwhelming emphasis on the employee and individual agency. Conversely, the comparatively limited research examining the employer perspective has often excluded consideration of the employee. Our review highlights these characteristics, along with outlining other common critical issues and recommendations for overcoming them. We also articulate how social exchange theory can serve as an underlying mechanism to integrate research within and between disciplines, and we present the strategic employability architecture framework based on strategic human resource management to facilitate integration of employer and employee perspectives.

Academics and lay people alike commonly equate employment with employability. While the former refers to having a job, the latter concerns the ability to realize job opportunities within and between employers over time (Forrier, Sels, & Stynen, 2009). It has been presented as the new

form of employment security for employees by academics, employers, and policy-makers. Employability is thus far more complex than simply having a job, and is instead a dynamic interplay between employees (in terms of fulfilling the job), employers (via competitive advantage), and the economy or society (offering full employment) over time.

It is of course inappropriate to discount the importance of having a job, as this is the primary means by which people around the globe procure both necessities and luxuries for themselves and their families. Employment is far more than a paycheck and source of sustenance for many employees, as it also provides purpose and meaning for many people's lives (Ahonen, Fujishiro, Cunningham, Flynn, 2018; Lepisto & Pratt, 2017). As such, employment

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provides opportunities for self-development, realizing and utilizing one's potential, as well as serving and unifying with others (Savikas et al., 2009; Weeks & Schaffert, 2019). The current reality for employees is made even more complex due to globalization, dynamism in jobs and careers, and the ever-changing employer–employee relationship (Horney, Pasmore, & O'Shea, 2010). This scenario in turn has made employment prospects less predictable (Arthur & Rousseau, 1996) and shifted responsibility for employment opportunities and security away from employers and toward employees (Forrier, De Cuyper, & Akkermans, 2018). For employers, employability provides the potential to match human capital with strategic objectives, as well as to help manage the supply and demand for talent in ever-changing internal and external labor markets (Thijssen, Van der Heijden, & Rocco, 2008). Employers may therefore want to attract employable workers and invest in the development of employability attributes that are relevant for achieving organizational goals, making employability a valuable aspect of the strategic approach to human resource management (HRM). We therefore posit that employability is an appropriate and valuable lens through which to understand the inherent complexity of the employer–employee relationship; this comprises the ultimate focus of our review and recommendations for advancing contemporary employability research.

The interest and value of employability, for both employees and employers, is reflected in the fact that it has been studied across multiple disciplines and levels in the academic universe, such as labor economics (Hasluck, 2001), education (Knight & Yorke, 2004), vocational counseling (Brown & Krane, 2000), careers (Akkermans & Tims, 2017), HRM (Nilsson & Ellström, 2012), and work and organizational psychology (Cascio, 1995). As shown in Table 1, each discipline in which employability has been studied has its own perspectives, associated stakeholders, key responsibilities, and outcomes. Although our initial review encompasses much of the employability research landscape, we ultimately focus on research that has directly examined the employer and employee as primary stakeholders, which is largely found in the careers, HRM, and work and organizational psychology literatures. The reason for this is that despite the undeniable importance of both employers and employees in all employability research, our review reveals that rarely, if ever, has one stream drawn on any of the others. Such segregation of employers and employees impedes comparison, accumulation, refinement, and application, and thus handicaps research across disciplines from benefiting from one another's insights (Forrier, Verbruggen, & De Cuyper, 2015; McQuaid & Lindsay, 2005; Thijssen et al., 2008). We therefore endeavor to integrate existing employability research so as to not

TABLE 1
Select Employability Disciplines, Associated Stakeholders, Key Responsibilities, and Example Outcomes

Employability Perspective	Focal Stakeholders	Key Responsibilities	Example Outcomes ^a
Labor economics	Workforce (national, regional, industry)	Employment levels	Unemployment rates Labor participation rates
Education	Students Schools Employers	Job search skills and processes, and curriculum design and content	Graduation rates, (quality of) employment, enrollments, high-performing talent
Vocational counseling	Clients Counselors Employers	Content, processes, counselor competence, and employer–employee engagement	Quality employment, client satisfaction, repeat contracts
Careers	Employees Employers	Self-directed development of KSAOs and other individual differences (e.g., competencies and dispositions)	Employment, objective and subjective career success
HRM	Employers (HR professionals and managers) Employees	Recruitment, selection, development, promotion, and rewards	Quality applicants, high-performing and committed employees
Work and organizational psychology	Employees Employers	Individual differences, career management	Low stress, motivation, career development, domain-specific and general well-being

^a It would be appropriate to add “sustained” to most of the outcomes given the inherent importance of time (e.g., quality employment over time).

only penetrate existing siloes but also highlight and help resolve critical issues, tensions, and paradoxes found in extant scholarly work on the topic.

Further motivating our ultimate focus on the employer–employee relationship is the fact that employers (can) no longer guarantee lifelong employment, and, in turn, employability has evolved and been presented as the new form of employment security for employees the world over. This fundamental change in the relationship between these two stakeholders means that employees must cultivate their employability to remain relevant and satisfied in the workforce over time (Fugate, 2006; Wilthagen & Tros, 2004). The emphasis on employee agency appears to have dominated employability research since the 2000s, with the role of the employer largely absent. This observation is fundamentally problematic given the fact that most employees remain embedded in an interdependent employment relationship, meaning their employability is not entirely under their own control (Forrier, De Cuyper, & Akkermans, 2018). Moreover, employers around the globe are competing intensely for talent, and this competition has compelled them to identify alternative, innovative, and effective ways to attract, develop, retain, and motivate employees (Trank, Rynes, & Bretz, 2002). Put plainly, employers and employees need each other to compete, survive, and thrive, which means both need to be increasingly proactive, strategic, and collaborative to meet their respective and collective challenges.

We address this reality and support our claim by pursuing three fundamental and cumulative goals. First, we identify overarching themes in employability research in the new millennium that has investigated either employers *or* employees (Goal 1). Our initial review shows that the employee perspective is most dominant and that the employers and employees are treated, intentionally or not, as segregated stakeholders. Second, and drawing from our observations associated with Goal 1, we narrow our focus to research that has explicitly embedded employability within the employer–employee relationship, hence including both primary stakeholders. From this we identify and outline notable critical issues and recommended solutions to bring the employer–employee dynamic to the fore (Goal 2). Lastly (Goal 3), we explicate means for integrating and advancing employability research. In particular, we build on social exchange theory (SET) (Blau, 1964) as an underlying integrating mechanism for employability research within and between disciplines. We use SET to create the strategic employability architecture (SEA) framework, which is grounded in

strategic HRM research and provides guidance for future researchers on how to examine the dynamic and interdependent employer–employee relationship. Before pursuing these three fundamental goals, however, we present a historical overview of employability research. This overview offers researchers a high-level overview of the employability domain, as well as a context for our review, themes, critical issues, recommendations, and eventual integration.

THE HISTORY OF EMPLOYABILITY RESEARCH

The earliest reference to employability was made in the mid-1950s by Feintuch (1955), and over the ensuing decades the concept of employability and associated research have evolved in parallel with changes in the labor market and the employer–employee relationship (Thijssen, et al., 2008). For instance, the “normal” career was often characterized by decades-long employment with a single employer, wherein lifelong job development and security was exchanged for employee loyalty. Research from the 1950s through the 1970s focused largely on the macro level and the aim of full employment. The 1950s and 1960s were characterized by a strong need to add people to the workforce in order to meet the ever-increasing labor demands of consistent post-war growth. Employability in that period mainly centered on stimulating unemployed and “difficult-to-place persons” to participate in the labor market (e.g., Feintuch, 1955; Wadsworth, Scott, & Wells, 1961). The 1970s included large layoffs and unemployment due to recessions, but perhaps the most notable change in employability research during this period was the increased interest within the domain of vocational counseling, and the increased importance of understanding how unemployed people sought and found employment (Gottfredson, 1981). It also spawned interest from labor economists who focused on full employment within and between particular segments of the labor force (blue-versus white-collar workers, and both college-educated and not). More generally, from the 1950s through the 1970s employability research focused almost exclusively on adding people to the workforce, reflecting a macro perspective. Macro-level employability research focused on full employment, and interventions were mainly undertaken at a national level (Feintuch, 1955; Forsyth & Mininger, 1966; Orr, 1973). Interventions and activities involved government programs intended to increase the labor market qualifications of disadvantaged or unemployed workers, and little attention was given to career development. The lack of attention to career development can in part be explained by the

reality at that time—a dominance of employer-managed careers within a single organization (Magnum, 1976; Orr, 1973).

A notable milestone occurred in 1976 when Tim Hall foreshadowed a changing employment landscape, one in which employees would be confronted with far less stability and much greater complexity, and these changes would necessitate employees to be more adaptable and engage in career self-management (Hall, 1976). This change was spurred by employers who were challenged by increased uncertainty and competition due to emerging technologies and growing globalization. With these developments attention in employability research shifted to the meso or organization level in the 1980s. Employers were the focal actors and used employability as a means for matching talent supplies with changing organizational demands (Thijssen et al., 2008). Employers looked for strategies, policies, and practices to enhance their organizational flexibility and competitiveness. An employable workforce was a means to achieve this flexibility (Murphy, 1985). This manifested in the notion of the so-called flexible firm (Atkinson, 1984), in which employees were categorized as core (permanent), periphery (temporary), and external (free agents). These categories and associated responsibilities and investments were intended to distinguish employees' respective roles in increasing employers' flexibility. Employability became a human resources (HR) initiative intended to optimize the deployment of employees (Forrier & Sels, 2003a), and each employee category was associated with different employer–employee relationships and degrees of career management. Training and development opportunities were mainly focused on core workers, with other workers ignored or left to their own devices (Hakim, 1990). The resulting inequality between the three categories created numerous conflicts between employers, employees, unions, and government organizations (Platt, 1986; Pollert, 1988; Procter, Rowlinson, McArdle, Hassard, & Forrester, 1994). Employers wanted to maximize flexibility while limiting resource commitments to core workers, while labor unions battled for collective agreements for all workers. To summarize, employability in the 1980s was seen as a means of flexibility for organizations, and its purpose was efficient and effective human resource utilization. Important interventions and activities pertained to the management of intraorganizational staffing problems, assuming both quantitative (number of periphery workers) and qualitative

flexibility (employability or functional flexibility of core workers) within the context of the “flexible firm.”

Beginning in the 1990s, research evolved along with the changes in the employer–employee relationship, and employability became the individual employee's responsibility (Thijssen et al., 2008). The traditional linear, single-organization, hierarchical career was proclaimed dead (Arthur, 1994; Hall, 1996; Mirvis & Hall, 1994). New career paradigms, such as the boundaryless (Arthur, 1994) and protean (Hall, 2004) career, reflected the idea that employees could no longer rely on one employer to develop a sustainable career (Iles, 1997). The increasing interest in these new career paradigms was connected to changing notions of the psychological contract (Hiltrop, 1995) between employer and employee. The so-called modern psychological contract (Altman & Post, 1996), or the new protean career contract (Hall & Moss, 1998) that emerged, enabled changes in employers' and workers' perceptions and expectations of each other, regarding responsibilities for employability management (Herriott, 1992, 1995; Rousseau, 1995). The emphasis in employability research also shifted and began to transition from the employer to the employee (De Vos, Dewettinck, & Buyens, 2009). As a result, employability research from the 1990s on concentrated on the employee's ability to cope with changes in both internal and external labor markets and obtain gainful, if not also fulfilling, employment (Thijssen et al., 2008). Scholars in the field began identifying characteristics of employees that would enable them to adapt effectively in the new and evermore unstable career landscape, one in which they themselves assumed primary responsibility for opportunities and outcomes within and between employers over time (Fugate, Kinicki, & Ashforth, 2004; Tekleab & Taylor, 2003). Consistent with this trend, researchers presented employability as a “personal resource” (De Cuyper, Mäkikangas, Kinnunen, Mauno, & De Witte, 2012), a set of competencies (Van der Heijden, Notelaers, et al., 2018; Van der Heijde & Van der Heijden, 2006), or a “personal asset” (Forrier et al., 2018) that employees should strive to acquire in order to effectively cope and grow.

This micro-level focus, however, has been criticized for becoming overly agentic (Forrier et al., 2018). This critique parallels larger societal changes, such as the aging of the working population, evolution of the gig and shared economy, and the increased value given to corporate social responsibility. Scholars have responded, including presenting the notion of *sustainable*

employability (e.g., Veld, Semeijn, & Van Vuuren, 2015), inspired by the sustainable career paradigm (De Vos & Van der Heijden, 2015). The premise is that not all careers are equally sustainable and that many factors potentially impact one's employability throughout the course of one's working life. Such authors have advocated a multiple-stakeholder perspective that focuses on the employer–employee relationship and its mutually beneficial consequences (De Vos, Van der Heijden, & Akkermans, 2020). Dello Russo et al. (2020) put forth a similar approach, stressing both employee career ownership and the role of the employer in providing developmental HRM practices. The notion of sustainable employability still focuses on the employee's ability to cope with changes, but it also reintroduces the employer as an important stakeholder.

To conclude, from the 1990s, employability was conceptualized and studied as a means for safeguarding and fostering the individual's job and career opportunities in both internal and external labor markets (Van der Heijde & Van der Heijden, 2006). Employability was relevant to all employees, not only the unemployed, and careers were seen as largely self-managed. This employee-centric focus of employability research continued in the new millennium, which marks a transition point between the historical context and our investigation of scholarship since the year 2000. Next, we outline the major themes that emerged from our initial review (Goal 1), along with the associated methods.

GOAL 1: MAJOR THEMES IN EMPLOYABILITY RESEARCH IN THE 2000s

To identify major themes in employability research since the 2000s, we conducted a systematic search using the search string “employability” or “employable” crossed with “employer,” “employee,” or “worker” in Web of Science, Business Source Complete, and Business Source Premier databases in 2019. This kept our search open but still with a clear focus on the employment relationship. The result was 938 hits, suggesting considerable interest in academic literature over the past two decades. This number was subsequently pared to 641 after refining the search and manually inspecting the articles. The excluded studies fell into one or more of three broad categories. First, the largest category contained studies on educational practices (e.g., action learning [Groves, Orbaek White, Panya, & Stewart, 2018]. extra-curricular activities [Tran, 2017]) to enhance employability among students. The second category involved studies that were not data-driven, such as conceptual papers (McQuaid & Lindsay, 2005), systematic reviews (Smith,

2010; Sullivan & Al Ariss, 2019; Wo, Lim, Choo, & Tan, 2015), and critiques or discussions (e.g., Christie, 2017; Forrier et al., 2018). The third and smallest category was a miscellaneous collection of studies in which employability was a key word, yet was not defined or operationalized in the manuscript. To clarify, in the excluded studies employability was only referred to in very general terms in the introduction, or as a possible outcome in research with a different focus (e.g., referred to in a section on practical implications).

Our protocol for identifying major themes involved four steps. In Step 1, the 641 articles were divided into two sets, which were reviewed by two members of the author team. They independently identified themes using abstracts and keywords, which generated eight themes each. Two different members of the author team compared and aggregated these themes (Step 2). Six common themes emerged, namely: (a) employability as a resource for coping with job insecurity, (b) employee benefits of employability, (c) employer benefits and risks (mentioned as one category by one author and two categories by the other author), (d) initiatives and practices to enhance employability, (e) employability at a macro level, and (f) individual and contextual antecedents of employability. These themes were then further refined and organized into those with outcomes associated with employability (themes a–c), and those pertaining to antecedents of employability (themes d–f). Themes mentioned by one but not the other author in Step 1 were: (g) employability scales and measures, (h) narratives and sense-making; and (i) specific target groups (e.g., older workers and disabled workers). Step 3 comprised a discussion among the entire author team to arrive at a final categorization, giving particular attention to discrepancies. This resulted in a categorization excluding themes (g) employability scales and measures, (h) narratives and sense-making, and (i) specific target groups. The main decision criterion was the number of studies in those specific categories. Furthermore, studies of specific target groups could easily be reclassified into one of the other themes, and studies on employability scales and measures were less relevant from a content perspective. Finally, in Step 4 we double-checked the initial coding of studies when distilling the different themes.

To conclude, our comprehensive and initial review of employability research since the year 2000 ultimately revealed six broad themes that cut across disciplines, stakeholders, and years. These six themes were further categorized into two—those in which

employability is an explanatory variable, and those that focus on factors explaining employability. A high-level description of each theme is provided below, along with example articles (see Table 2).

Employability as an Explanatory Variable

Three themes emerged from our review focusing on employability as an explanatory variable: (a) employability as a resource for coping with job insecurity, (b) employee benefits of employability, and (c) employer benefits and risks associated with employability.

Theme 1: Employability as a resource for coping with job insecurity. Studies in this theme occurred in the context of persistent changes in internal and external labor markets, and the resulting turbulence and diversity in employment trends and careers, such as unemployment, part-time versus full-time employment, flexwork, self-employed, bridge employment, and so on. Common in this theme are studies related to employee job (in)security (e.g., involuntary job loss). One manifestation of this is the so-called flexicurity debate in a number of mostly Scandinavian studies (see e.g., Berglund, Furaker, & Vulkan, 2014), wherein employers' need for flexibility intersects with workers' need for security. Employability in these studies, largely found in occupational health and, to a lesser extent, labor economics literature, has been presented by some as a coping resource (Chen & Lim, 2012), and by others as a buffer against perceptions of job insecurity (Chiesa, Fazi, Guglielmi, & Mariani, 2018; De Cuyper, Mäkikangas, et al., 2012; Dickerson & Green, 2012) and strain associated therewith (Berntson, Näswall, & Sverke, 2010; Green, 2011; Silla, De Cuyper, Gracia, Peiro, & De Witte, 2009). It is worth noting that strain has been defined quite broadly in employability research, including general and occupational health and well-being, as well as employee attitudes and behavior. Examples are psychological distress (Giorgi, Shoss, & Leon-Perez, 2015), burnout (Qiao, Xia, & Li, 2016), job dissatisfaction (Giorgi et al., 2015), and bullying (De Cuyper, Baillien, & De Witte, 2009). Studies in this theme have mainly focused on employees whose jobs are inherently insecure, such as temporary workers or those on fixed-term contracts (e.g., Gracia, Ramos, Peiró, Caballer, & Sora, 2011; Silla, Gracia, & Peiró, 2005). This work has explained how employability can provide additional opportunities and benefits with the same employer, another employer, or employment agencies. Studies included in this theme have all considered

the possible negative consequences of employment relationships becoming more unstable and volatile, and addressed how employability can be a buffer against these negative consequences. It also is worth noting that the employer's role in this theme is background or secondary, as it has generally been used only to describe the precariousness of employees' employment situations.

Theme 2: Employee benefits of employability. While employability researchers in Theme 1 examined employability as a means for avoiding undesirable outcomes and circumstances, studies in Theme 2 explored how employability benefits employees and highlight opportunities that changing employment relationships and the increased focus on individual agency may provide. Notably, employees who possess high employability are better equipped to benefit from a volatile and competitive environment, one that is characterized by rapid changes and more demanding job requirements (Gunz, Evans, & Jalland, 2000). Employability has been found to be an important predictor of both objective career success (number of promotions, income, and periods of unemployment) and subjective career success (job satisfaction and life satisfaction) (Hennekam, 2016; Seršić & Tomas, 2014; Van der Heijde & Van der Heijden, 2006).

Another interesting stream of work in this theme pertains to noncareer outcomes, such as one's resiliency and ability to deal with challenging situations (Rossier, Ginevra, Bollmann, & Nota, 2017), or job search behavior (McArdle, Waters, Briscoe, & Hall, 2007). Berntson, Näswall, & Sverke (2008) reported that self-perceived employability predicts self-efficacy—an important individual attribute for survival at the twenty-first century labor market. Other researchers have found positive relationships between employability and work engagement and life satisfaction (De Cuyper et al., 2008), vigor at work and job satisfaction (Kirves, Kinnunen, De Cuyper, & Makikangas, 2014), and affective commitment and positive emotions related to organizational change (Fugate & Kinicki, 2008). More generally, these studies have suggested that employability enables employees to protect—and, ideally, further enhance—both positive career- and noncareer outcomes, often beyond their current employment relationship.

Theme 3: Employer benefits and risks of employability. Other researchers examined the potential benefits and risks of employability for the employer. This research has most often been situated in the disciplines of careers and work and organizational psychology. An example is research related to

TABLE 2
Employability Themes in the 2000s

Themes—Goal 1	Research Questions	Core Variables	Research Samples	Main Measures	Disciplines	Example Papers	Perspective—Goal 2
<i>Employability as explanatory variable</i>							
Theme 1: Employability as a resource for coping with insecurity	Does employability prevent job insecurity or help to cope with job insecurity?	Job insecurity, employee strain, etc.	Temporary employees, agency workers employees in reorganizations, etc.	Perceived employability, reemployment	Occupational health, labor economics	Berntson & Marklund (2007) Dickerson & Green (2012)	Perspective 3: employee and employer reciprocity
Theme 2: Employee benefits of employability	Does employability lead to gains for the employee?	Objective career success, subjective career success, employee motivation, resilience, etc.	Employees, professionals, managers, university researchers, young workers, older workers, unemployed, etc.	Perceived employability, competences, re-employment	Career studies, occupational health	Kirves et al. (2014) McArdle et al. (2007) Van der Heijde & Van der Heijden (2006)	
Theme 3: Employer benefits and risks of employability	What are the benefits and risks of an employable workforce for employers?	Turnover (intentions), commitment, performance, ethical behavior, etc.	Employees, HR directors, etc.	Perceived employability, competences	Career studies, work and organizational psychology	Acikgoz et al., 2016 Hahn & Kim (2018)	Perspective 2: Employer-centric Perspective 3: employee and employer reciprocity
<i>Factors explaining employability</i>							
Theme 4: Individual and contextual antecedents of employability	Which individual or contextual factors explain individual employability?	Demographics (gender, age, ethnicity, disability, etc.), human capital, income, household characteristics, geographical mobility, local labor market strength, etc.	Employees, ethnic minorities, workers, older dismissed workers, potential employers of fictitious applicants, etc.	Transition into employment, labor underutilization, promotion, perceived employability (by employees, or by employers), hiring probability	Work and organizational psychology, HRM, labor economics, employment relations	Bailey et al. (2012) Bricout & Bentley (2000) Witekind et al. (2010)	
Theme 5: Initiatives and practices to enhance employability	How do employability practices and interventions influence	Employability activities, career development interventions, individual career	Employees in specific sectors, platform workers, older workers, persons	Perceived employability, competences, (re)employment	HRM, career studies, vocational counseling, labor economics	Akkermans et al. (2015) De Vos & Soens (2008) Gore (2005)	Perspective 1: Employee-centric

TABLE 2
(Continued)

Themes—Goal 1	Research Questions	Core Variables	Research Samples	Main Measures	Disciplines	Example Papers	Perspective—Goal 2
	individual employability?	management, impression management, employment and career counseling, training, transformational leadership, income support programs, demand-side interventions, etc.	with disabilities, low-income female migrant domestic workers, temporary workers, etc.	intention to retire, continued employment			
Theme 6: Employability at a macro level	What is the impact of public policies on macro-level employability?	Pension policies, unemployment policies, activation policies, education system, minimum wage policies, etc.	Older workers; students, etc.	Employment rates, general skill level	Social policy, educational science	Vodopivec (2002)	Excluded from Goal # 2
Conclusion across themes	Most research questions concern employability as a valuable asset that helps employees to survive or thrive in the labor market. Exceptions are theme 3 (employer) and theme 6 (society). Research questions addressing both employee and employer perspectives simultaneously is rare.	Most core variables are at the level of the individual employee, with the exception of a small set of studies on employer or governmental interventions and policies.	Most studies comprise employee data, very few studies including employer or organization data, and even fewer combining employee and employer perspectives simultaneously, thus largely ignoring the relationship between those two parties.	Most measures are at the employee level, mainly self-reports but also employment indicators. Lack of multi-source ratings (e.g., employee and their supervisors) or indicators at the employer level.			

the so-called employability paradox (De Cuyper & De Witte, 2011), which describes the tensions (top) managers often experience when contemplating investments in employee development. On the one hand, opportunities for training and other forms of development are highly valued by employees and can serve as effective means for attracting and retaining talent and enhancing performance (De Cuyper, Van der Heijden, & De Witte, 2011). A study among South Korean employees and their supervisors, for instance, found that perceived employability was positively related to in-role, adaptive, and extra-role performance (Hahn & Kim, 2018). On the other hand, these same investments can increase an employee's value and opportunities in the external labor market, which in turn may increase voluntary turnover and erode competitiveness for the employer (Forrier et al., 2015; Nelissen, Forrier & Verbruggen, 2017). Research on this topic has suggested that the relationship between employability and turnover is complex and may depend on contextual elements—job control (De Cuyper, Mauno, Kinnunen, & Makikangas, 2011), job security (Acikgoz, Sumer, & Sumer, 2016), and promotions (Benson, 2006).

Another interesting revelation from our initial review pertains to the relationship between employability and competitive advantage. Although the idea of an employable workforce as a source of competitive advantage is prevalent in both popular and practitioner press (e.g., Davies, Diemand-Yauman, & Van Dam, 2019), it is quite striking that most studies in our review were at the employee level and did not include the employer (for an exception, see Baruch, 2001). They largely dealt with the individual worker as a career agent who decides on whether to leave a particular employer, and, as such, seems to be relatively more in control of the employer–employee relationship. In other words, the employer perspective has been mostly ignored in the scholarly work included in our initial review. No studies were found to have directly addressed the implications of employability for employer competitiveness.

Factors Explaining Employability

Three of the themes from our initial review illuminated numerous factors proposed to contribute to, enhance, or otherwise foster employability: individual and contextual antecedents of employability, employability-enhancing initiatives and practices, and employability at the macro level.

Theme 4: Individual and contextual antecedents of employability. Studies in this theme considered the impact of individual and contextual

(organizational or labor market) factors that foster individuals' employability and help to explain why some employees are more employable than others (Forrier et al., 2009; for cogent conceptual arguments see Forrier et al., 2018). This research has been situated in multiple disciplines—work and organizational psychology, labor economics, HRM, and employment relations. Employability has been studied as transitions into employment (Lu, 2011), labor (under)utilization (Baum, Bill, & Mitchell, 2008), promotion (Buckman, Johnson, & Alexander, 2018), employability perceptions of employees (Berntson, Sverke, & Marklund, 2006; Croucher, Ramakrishnan, Rizov, & Benzinger, 2018), employability perceptions of employers (Batastini, Bolanos, & Morgan, 2014; Bricout & Bentley, 2000), and hiring probability (Ahmed, Granberg, & Lang, 2017).

Individual-level factors explaining employability include various individual differences, such as education, current job-related skills, transferrable skills, and willingness to change jobs (Wittekind, Raeder, & Grote, 2010); movement capital (Forrier & Sels, 2003a); and career competencies (Akkermans, Brenninkmeijer, Huibers, & Blonk, 2013; DeFillippi & Arthur, 1994). The implication is that such employees are better equipped to meet the challenges in today's volatile labor market. Other research in this theme has focused on contextual factors that explain employability, such as organizational changes (Agrawal & Tambe, 2016) or the strength of the local labor market (Bailey, Chapain, & de Ruyter, 2012; Berntson et al., 2006). Agrawal and Tambe (2016) found that many employees of companies acquired by private equity investors gained transferable, IT-complementary human capital that increased their long-term employability and wages.

Many studies within this theme focused on employability of a specific group of employees: ethnic minorities (Aeberhardt, Coudin, & Rathelot, 2017; Goldman, Cooper, & Kugler, 2019), vulnerable workers (Croucher et al., 2018), older workers (Guilbert, Carrein, Guénolé, Monfray, Rossier, & Priolo, 2018), or dismissed workers (Bailey et al., 2012). Most of these studies utilized employee samples. Others, however, took the employer perspective and examined employers' hiring decisions and perceptions of the employability of specific vulnerable groups, such as disabled employees (e.g., Bricout & Bentley, 2000), migrant workers (e.g., Bertrand & Mullainathan, 2004), or former criminals (e.g., Batastini et al., 2014). Discrimination was a central topic in these studies, many of which were experimental and where one or more characteristics of applicants

were manipulated. Notably, we did not find any studies addressing the role of other contextual (i.e., organizational or labor market factors) in explaining employability from the employer's perspective.

Theme 5: Initiatives and practices to enhance employability. Studies in this theme have conceptualized employability as a malleable quality that can be influenced by numerous actors (e.g., manager and mentors) and initiatives (e.g., training and development) (Forrier & Sels, 2003b). Theme 5 has been prevalent in HRM, career studies, vocational counseling, and labor economics. First, HRM practices have been examined as key means by which employers foster the employability of their workers, such as providing diverse work experiences and opportunities for development (e.g., Akkermans, Brenninkmeijer, Schaufeli, & Blonk, 2015; De Vos, De Hauw, & Van der Heijden, 2011), or formal and informal learning opportunities (Van der Heijden, Boon, van der Klink, & Meijs, 2009).

Second, several studies addressed the initiatives taken by employees to enhance their employability. These have mostly been published in the career literature and fall within the "new career" paradigm (Arthur & Rousseau, 1996; Hall, 2004), in which employee agency is central (Forrier et al., 2018). Examples are the influence of individual career management practices (e.g., De Vos & Soens, 2008).

Third, leaders influence their subordinates' employability via supportive and inspirational behaviors, particularly those associated with transformational leadership (Van der Heijde & Van der Heijden, 2014; Xie, Baranchenko, Lin, Lau, & Ma, 2019). Transformational leaders influence employees' attitudes and behaviors through individualized support and intellectual stimulation, which have been found to enhance their employability (Bottcher, Albrecht, Venz, & Felfe, 2018; Van der Heijden & Bakker, 2011). Interestingly, our initial review only revealed studies on transformational leadership in relation to employability, and not on any other form of leadership.

Fourth, several studies have also looked at active labor market policies enhancing individuals' employability. While some studies have focused on supply-side interventions targeting individuals (e.g., Campolieti, Gomez, & Gunderson, 2009), other studies have considered demand-side interventions targeting employers. The latter have often critiqued the sole focus on the supply side in employability policies and questioned the agency idea emphasizing the individual's responsibility for employability enhancement (Forrier et al., 2018). Gore (2005), for instance, argued for a stronger involvement of employers

and studied the influence of demand-led labor market policies in the United Kingdom in improving employability. In a similar vein, a study in the Netherlands articulated a national intervention aimed at expanding and extending employment options for older workers (i.e., their employability), central to which are effective communication and policies intended to mitigate obstacles (e.g., stereotypes) and to inform capabilities and opportunities for these workers (Van Selm & Van der Heijden, 2013).

Considered together, studies in the fifth theme have suggested that employability is malleable and can be developed by employees and others. However, as with previous themes, from our initial review we may conclude that the employer perspective has been largely absent, although some studies have stressed the importance of demand-side interventions.

Theme 6: Employability at a macro level. Economic and other public policies have been investigated as means for fostering employability at the industry, regional, and country levels, including policies specific to pensions, unemployment, and education. Such studies have been mainly situated in disciplines such as social policy and educational sciences, and have examined the impact of government policies on employability outcomes such as the overall employment rate or the skill level in a country. For instance, Vodopivec (2002) explicated how employability policies incentivizing the flow of workers between the Estonian labor market and those of its neighbors facilitated the transition of Estonia's economy from communism to an open market. Another example is the study of McQuaid and Bergmann (2016), who identified which career and development policies are needed to create employment in the renewable energy sector in Scotland. Employability research at a macro level has also reflected a preoccupation with, or focus on, the employee while ignoring the added value of employability for employers.

Having explicated the major themes that emerged from our broad review, we now provide a brief conclusion before moving on to Goal 2.

Conclusion from Our Review (Goal 1)

Table 2 summarizes our major conclusions from the review and clearly shows that existing employability research has predominately focused on employees, sometimes on employers, but rarely on both key stakeholders. This focus or bias was evident across all themes. More specifically, the vast majority of

the factors influenced by employability (i.e., outcomes), as well as those that foster employability (i.e., antecedents), essentially “reside” within employees or employers. This is unfortunate as nearly all employability research, even that related to public policy, has either implied or explicitly described employability as a function of, or relationship between, these two parties. Despite acknowledging the fact that both perspectives are intertwined, an overwhelming proportion of research in our initial review examined the employee perspective without empirical data about, or explicit consideration of, the employer. The limited number of studies that did focus on the employer perspective most often did so without overt consideration of the employee (e.g., Bricout & Bentley, 2000). Most rare, in fact, was employability research explicitly examining both the employee and employer perspectives simultaneously.

This remarkable finding is problematic and leads to Goal 2, namely a focused account of employability research that has simultaneously studied both the employer and employee. Not only does this focus align with what emerged from our initial review, but it also enables us to more clearly identify challenges and opportunities for future researchers, as well as a means for integrating existing research. To this end, we next describe how we arrived at a narrower selection of relevant literature, which is followed by an account of the critical issues revealed by this subset of employability studies.

GOAL 2: EMPLOYABILITY WITHIN THE EMPLOYEE–EMPLOYER RELATIONSHIP

Our second goal is to provide an account of employability research since 2000 that has included both the employee and employer. This represents a means for validating the findings of our initial and broader review, along with identifying a number of critical issues that, when addressed, can guide and advance future research. We selected 69 primary studies that explicitly referred to the employee–employer relationship, and while this culling may appear substantial on the surface, we interpreted the employee–employer relationship quite broadly. Specifically, we included studies that mentioned the employee and the employer in the literature review, even when one of the perspectives was not included in the design of the study, or was not thoroughly incorporated into the theoretical framework or discussion of the results. This was done with the purpose of capturing the breadth of such research.

To elaborate, studies from the initial, broader review were excluded, for three reasons. First, we excluded studies that sampled individuals who were not currently embedded in an employment relationship—those who were graduates, students, job applicants, unemployed, retired, or ill; those with criminal records; and immigrants entering the labor market. Second, and overlapping with the first exclusion criterion, we eliminated studies on policy interventions or implications, as described under Theme 6 (“employability at a macro level”). Third, we deleted studies that focused exclusively on the employee or on the employer. Employee-only studies were by far the largest group, comprising more than half of the studies in the broader review. Many of the excluded studies concerned scholarly work under Theme 1 (“employability as a resource for coping with job insecurity”), Theme 2 (“employee benefits of employability”) and, to a lesser extent, Themes 4 (“individual and contextual factors explaining employability”) and 5 (“initiatives and practices to enhance employability”). In stark contrast, employer-only studies comprised roughly one tenth of those from the broader review, and most of these related to labor market discrimination (see Theme 4). The fact that so many themes were excluded confirms our finding from the initial review (Goal 1) that existing employability research has rarely explicitly examined both the employee and employer perspectives simultaneously. In addition, it underscores the finding that the employee-centric and agentic perspective continues to dominate employability research. This agentic storyline reads as follows: Employees are responsible for their own careers, and they have to be employable to cope with uncertainty (Theme 1) and develop a successful career (Theme 2). To do this, employees need appropriate forms of human capital (Theme 4) and must continually learn and adapt to enhance their own employability (Theme 5).

Concerning time of publication, a steep increase was found in empirical employability studies focusing on the employee–employer relationship in recent years. Approximately one fifth of the scholarly work in our focused review was published between 2000 and 2009, and the remainder between 2010 and 2019. This trend may suggest a growing interest in employability research that includes both the employer and employee perspective. Studies conducted in Europe were by far the largest proportion, followed by Asia, the United States, and

Australia. European samples represented 13 countries across the continent.¹

Our focused review initially revealed three perspectives—that of the employee (Perspective 1: Employee-Centric), the employer (Perspective 2: Employer-Centric), and both (Perspective 3: Employer–Employee Reciprocity). These perspectives were determined independently by two members of the author team, and any discrepancies in coding were discussed and resolved. The discussion also resulted in the inclusion of an additional perspective—vulnerable employees (Perspective 4: Vulnerable Employees). We noticed that many articles focused on specific vulnerable groups, such as temporary or older workers. This perspective cuts across observations in the themes identified under Goal 1 and perspectives identified under Goal 2. Unique to this perspective, for instance, is a focus on a potential imbalance in the employment relationship, often favoring the employer. These four perspectives are explained next.

Perspective 1: Employee-Centric

First, it is important to note that findings from our focused review confirmed and helped validate those of the initial and broader review. Specifically, even in research that has included both the employer and the employee, the employee perspective dominates. Studies also mainly came from Theme 5 of the broader review (initiatives and practices to enhance employability).

The employee-only perspective fits within the latest phase in the history of employability research, which positions employability as a means to safeguard and foster job and career opportunities in uncertain labor markets. This is also part of the foundation of the emerging sustainable career concept noted in the history section above. The starting point in these studies has posited employability as essential for employees to survive and thrive in their careers, both short and long term.

¹ While this could be interpreted as meaning that employability research is context-specific, a more accurate interpretation may be that the employee–employer relationship has always been high on the European research agenda. More generally, employee activism and calls for employee-friendly work environments are increasing around the industrialized world, and the European context may simply foreshadow this larger trend. If this is the case, then our study is particularly timely in guiding and increasing the impact of future employability research.

Studies using this perspective have tended to focus on initiatives and practices, whether generic or more specific, as determinants of individuals' employability. Examples of generic initiatives and practices are perceived employer's support for competence development (De Vos et al., 2011; Drange, Bernstrøm, & Mamelund, 2018), and perceived organizational support (Guilbert et al., 2018). Examples of more specific initiatives and practices are formal and informal learning (Froehlich, Beusaert, Segers, & Gerken, 2014; Groot & Maasen van den Brink, 2000; Van der Heijden, Boon et al., 2009), training and task flexibility (Sanders & De Grip, 2004), and learning the value of the job (Van der Heijden & Bakker, 2011).

When theory has been used it has most often been human capital theory (Becker, 1994), where the underlying premise is that investment in employability enhances the employees' human capital and thus their employability (De Vos et al., 2011; Drange et al., 2018; Groot & Maasen van den Brink, 2000; Van der Heijden, Boon et al., 2009). However, human capital theory is also employee-centric and highlights only how it helps or hurts the employee, and not the employer. Potential advantages for the employer, if touched upon at all, have been only briefly discussed in the introduction to these studies.

Moreover, all studies were quantitative, mostly using only employee data. Those that included employer data typically only measured supervisor's perceived employability of subordinates (Van der Heijden & Bakker, 2011; Van der Heijde & Van der Heijden, 2014). Although this has the potential to make valuable contributions, such data were mainly used to address concerns regarding potential common-method bias (Podsakoff, MacKenzie, & Podsakoff, 2012). Most studies were also cross-sectional (for exceptions, see, e.g., Drange et al., 2018; Sanders & De Grip, 2004), which reflects a fundamental disconnect between conceptualizations of employability as a quality whose benefits are realized over time and study designs.

Perspective 2: Employer-Centric

Only a few studies, mostly from Theme 3 (employer benefits and risks), took the perspective of the employer. They presented employability as a human resource that should enhance competition and facilitate staffing flexibility. Flexibility, as noted above, was part of the history of employability in the 1980s. This research investigated employers' motives to invest in employability development (Baruch, 2001;

De Vos, De Hauw, & Willemse, 2015; Scholarios et al., 2008), including the added value of an employable workforce for the organization (Arocena, Núñez, & Villanueva, 2007). The rationale is that employers make employability investment decisions in terms of competitive advantage—enhancing potential.

Theories used in this perspective are consistent with the focus on competitive advantage, such as human capital theory (Scholarios et al., 2008) and the efficiency wage model (Arocena et al., 2007). Strategic HRM and the resource-based view of the firm were the dominant lens in a study by De Vos et al. (2015), wherein employers aim to develop employee competencies that align with the organization's strategy and contribute to organizational functioning. Competency management then becomes a human resource tool, with employees as key assets.

More generally, employer-centric studies have been mainly qualitative and based on employer interview data (Baruch, 2001; De Vos et al., 2015; Scholarios et al., 2011); an exception is a study by Arocena et al. (2006), which used an employability index at the organization level. They also examined what employers do (e.g., policies and practices), but did not consider employees' perceptions or reactions.

Perspective 3: Employee–Employer Reciprocity

A subset of the selected studies, which were fewer in number than Perspective 1 but greater than Perspective 2, connected the employee and the employer. Unlike Perspectives 1 and 2, this third perspective acknowledged that employment relationships are reciprocal. Investments from one party are reciprocated by the other party, so that ultimately both parties gain from the relationship—or, conversely, a lack of investments from one party leads the other party to withdraw from the relationship. Some of these studies seem to be only slightly removed from the employer-centric view in the 1980s and from the employee-centric view since the 1990s. For instance, this research has suggested that employability investments made by either party are mutually beneficial, and in turn an active role by both employees and employers is optimal. Such studies have come in two streams, though mostly from Themes 3 (employer benefits and risks) and, to a lesser extent, from Theme 1 (employability as a resource to cope with job insecurity).

Employer investments in employability can be generic (e.g., perceived investments in development [Solberg & Dysvik, 2016]) or specific (e.g., training [Benson, 2006]; learning practices, transformational

leadership [Camps & Rodriguez, 2011; Camps & Torres, 2011]; human resource practices [Liu, 2018]; on- and off-the-job training, job design [Nelissen et al., 2017]). The returns on those investments for employees are enhanced employability. Employees reciprocate with loyalty (e.g., commitment, reduced turnover intention, internal employability orientation) or improved performance. Other studies have made such investments conditional, such that employers invest only if their employees do too. For example, Veld, Semeijn and Van Vuuren (2015) showed that human resource development practices relate to employability when employees are willing to be mobile.

A second stream has examined individuals' employability as a resource that employees possess that potentially benefits the employer in the form of loyalty or performance. This is, however, conditional in that the employer investment is a way to “return the favor.” For example, Hahn and Kim (2018) and De Cuyper, Van der Heijden and De Witte (2011) argued that employability leads to performance when employees feel they have a high-quality employment relationship. Along similar lines, De Cuyper, Mauno et al. (2011) hypothesized and demonstrated that employable workers stay with the organization when they have a resourceful job. Conversely, employers may face losses when their investments in employable workers are insufficient, as employable workers are more inclined to leave the organization (Acikgoz et al., 2016; Berntson et al., 2010).

Where theory has been made explicit, which again is not always the case (e.g., Berntson et al., 2010), social exchange theory (SET) (Blau, 1964) has dominated. Employer investments in employability create a sense of indebtedness in employees, and this triggers positive attitudes and behavior from them in return. The pattern in those studies has been outlined as follows: employer invests in employability → employee gains employability → employee reciprocates. Employee reciprocation has been seen as an outcome in most studies and as a moderator in a few studies (e.g., Veld et al., 2015). Conversely, employable workers are highly valuable to the employer due to their stock of knowledge and skills, performance potential, and flexibility. As such, these attributes should be perceived as valuable and thus rewarded by the employer. The typical pattern is employee employability → employer gain, with employer (lack of) investment as moderator in this relationship.

With a few exceptions (De Cuyper, Mauno et al., 2011; Nelissen et al., 2017; Philippaers et al., 2017;

Solberg & Dysvik, 2016), studies have been cross-sectional and included only employee data. If other-rated data have been used, they have assessed performance as an indicator of employer gain, such as ad hoc supervisor ratings (Camps & Rodriguez, 2011) or yearly performance review ratings (Hahn & Kim, 2018). No studies were found to have directly addressed outcomes of employability on employer competitiveness.

Perspective 4: Vulnerable Employees

Two particular employee groups emerged in our focused review: temporary and older workers. This aligns with trends in the labor market, namely changing demographics and the inherent need for increasing contractual flexibility. These groups reflect potential tension in the employment relationship that was not explored in other studies. On the one hand, employability is critical for both temporary and older workers: Temporary workers have to line up for jobs and older workers have to prove their value vis-à-vis younger (and less costly) workers. Accordingly, the need for employability development is high for those categories of workers (Forrier & Sels, 2003b; Martin, Dymock, Billett, & Johnson, 2014). On the other hand, employers may not feel compelled to fulfill this need given the shorter timeframe of the employment relationship for both types of employees (Forrier & Sels, 2003b; Loretto & White, 2006). This scenario characterizes imbalanced employment relationships in which employers have more control—similar to many of the relationships in Perspective 4.

Studies adopting a one-sided employee perspective have shown that temporary workers (Forrier & Sels, 2003b; Hakansson & Isidorsson, 2015; Lindsay, Canduela, & Raeside, 2013) and older workers (Lindsay et al., 2013; Van der Heijden, Gorgievski, & De Lange, 2016) receive less training. This is unfortunate, as employability investments by employers, such as training (Picchio & van Ours, 2018), constructive learning climate (Van der Heijden et al., 2016), or idiosyncratic deals (i-deals) (Ostrom, Pennings, & Bal, 2016) can enhance the employability of vulnerable groups. Those studies have mainly built on human capital theory (Becker, 1994), often in combination with age-related theories about lifespan development (Van der Heijden et al., 2016). Studies adopting an employer-only perspective have investigated employer motives; for instance, motives to train older employees (Fleischmann, Koster, & Schippers, 2015; Loretto & White, 2006; Martin et al., 2014). Building

on economic thinking about wage–productivity relationships and shorter pay-off periods, such research has hypothesized and then shown that employers are reluctant to train older employees.

The comparatively few studies on reciprocity have shown that employer investments are often reciprocated by employees through commitment and performance. Chambel and colleagues (Chambel & Sobral, 2011; Chambel, Sobral, Espada, & Cural, 2015), for example, showed that training strengthens commitment of temporary workers, as it is seen as a signal of longer-term commitment by the employer. Other studies have highlighted that the employer only makes such investments when a return is likely. For instance, Fleischmann and Koster (2018) found that employers are more willing to provide training, including to older workers, when workers are interested in participating in further training. Willingness to participate in training is seen as commitment to the organization, and is thus likely to be reciprocated by the employer. Such investments vary depending on age, however, as investing in older workers (55 or older) is perceived as less likely to provide a sufficient return on investment between time of training and retirement. Particularly striking is the observation that none of these studies considered what value temporary or older employees bring to the employment relationship, which further illustrates the imbalance in the employer–employee relationship.

Having described the primary perspectives of our focused review, we next articulate critical issues that emerged therefrom. The intent of delineating these critiques is to highlight what we see as key opportunities for future researchers to advance employability research.

CRITICAL ISSUES AND OPPORTUNITIES

It is important to note that we arrived at a similar conclusion in our focused review as in the broader one. Specifically, even in research that has included both the employer and employee, the employee perspective has been dominant. Our focused review did, however, reveal additional insights that can guide and advance future research. Of greatest note to us were a number of critical issues that cut across the six themes outlined earlier. These critical issues, we believe, help to explain why employability researchers in the 2000s have segregated employees and employers, and addressing these same critical issues is vital to advancing the field. We substantiate these assertions in the following section, wherein we outline these critical issues along with recommended solutions that surfaced from our focused review.

Critical Issue 1—Segregated Stakeholders

Despite narrowing our subset of studies to those containing both employers and employees, about two in three were exclusively employee centric. This, however, should not be interpreted as meaning that the employer perspective was well-covered in one third of the studies. On the contrary, most extant empirical work examined supervisor ratings of their subordinates' characteristics or job opportunities (Liu, 2018), or of job abilities as a proxy for the same (Jansson, Bjorklund, Perseius, & Gunnarsson, 2015). Several studies used supervisor ratings of the same competencies on which employees rated themselves (e.g., Stoffers & Van der Heijden, 2018; Van der Heijden & Bakker, 2011; Van der Heijden et al., 2010). More generally, employer considerations have been commonly limited to methodological concerns (abating concerns of bias), or to the extent to which employees themselves think employers' support or facilitate employees' development interests. This is inconsistent with HR and other research that has portrayed employees as valuable assets and critical means for cultivating organizational flexibility, as sources of competitive advantage, and thus as worthy of investment (Nyberg & Wright, 2015).

When considered in the context of our historical overview, it seems that the pendulum has swung too far and over-corrected from earlier times when employability research had a predominately macro or national-economy focus. Employability research, therefore, is in dire need of an explicit integration of employee and employer perspectives that considers the dynamism in this relationship. To elaborate, capturing the interdependence between employers and employees (Forrier et al., 2018) requires more than simply assuming the perceived value or reaction of one to the other. It is instead necessary to include both employers and employees in each study, explicitly identifying what each party values in the other, and their respective evaluations and reactions, changes, and exchanges over time.

Critical Issue 2—Blind to Inherent Dynamism

The vast majority of existing employability research has portrayed the employer–employee relationship in terms of discrete, unidirectional exchanges. For example, the assumption from the employee-centric perspective is that employer investments lead to employability (e.g., Drange et al., 2018; Guilbert et al., 2018), from the employer-centric perspective it is that investments in the “right” competencies lead to

competitive advantage (De Vos et al., 2015), and from the perspective of vulnerable groups it is that employer investments may not yield sufficient return for employers (Fleischmann et al., 2015, Loretto & White, 2006; Martin et al., 2014). Although studies within the employer–employee reciprocity perspective have explained why investments can generate mutual gains, we posit that they have done so from either an employer or an employee perspective—in a discrete and unidirectional manner. Employer investments, for instance, enhance employability, which then improve employee performance (e.g., Camps & Rodriguez, 2011; Liu, 2018; Nelissen et al., 2017). Employable workers provide the employer with valuable skills, in return for employer investments in additional employability enhancements (e.g., De Cuyper, Mauno et al., 2011; Hahn & Kim, 2018).

We argue that this unidirectional view fragments the employment relationship into simple or discrete exchanges. It therefore insufficiently captures the true nature of the employment relationship, wherein employees and employers are embedded in longer-term exchange relationships that unfold over time. This short-term view is reinforced by the observation that the vast majority of employability studies in our focused review were cross-sectional and represented only one moment in time. Although two wave studies exist, they too failed to capture the dynamics in the employment relationship wherein both employers and employees give and take. Future research, therefore, needs to conceptualize and examine employability as a dynamic, ongoing phenomenon in which employers and employees engage in multiple exchanges over time.

To elaborate, a dynamic perspective appropriately recognizes the fundamental importance of time in employability research and can be understood along three core properties—feedback loops, inertia, and asymmetric influence (for a discussion of properties of dynamic processes, see Cronin & Vancouver, 2018). *Feedback loops* allow exchanges to be connected in reinforcing cycles or balancing cycles. Reinforcing cycles constitute causal chains that go in one direction (positive or negative). A positive reinforcing cycle, for instance, occurs when employer investments make employees feel more employable, which they then reciprocate with improved performance and commitment, thus contributing to the organization's goals. This then instigates new investments from the employer. A negative reinforcing cycle is illustrated when vulnerable employees (e.g., temporary or older workers) receive less employability-enhancing investments from their employers, due to a perceived lack

of return on investment. These workers' employability is further eroded, making current and future employers even less inclined to invest in them in the future. This brief primer reveals considerable opportunity for future researchers to explore the role of reinforcing cycles, such as in the obsolescence of employee skills and diminishing employer investments (Van Loo, De Grip, & De Steur, 2001), as well as the bifurcation of labor markets into haves and have-nots (Forrier et al., 2018).

Balancing cycles, in contrast, are self-correcting and may reach equilibrium. For example, the employability paradox explained above may initiate a balancing cycle (Van der Heijde & Van der Heijden, 2006). Employable individuals may receive more employability-enhancing investments from their employers as a means to attract and retain them. This may then increase these employees' employability, and thus also their employment opportunities with other employers. The fear of potentially losing such employees may motivate employers to limit (further) employability-enhancing investments, and in turn this may hinder employees' employability. When played out over time, the presumption is that a balance is reached between employer investments and employee contributions, thus embedding the employability paradox in the employer–employee relationship. This balancing cycle may explain why empirical results on the employability paradox have been inconclusive and have simultaneously pointed to both a retention-stimulating path and a turnover-stimulating path (Nelissen et al., 2017). Appropriately conceptualizing, designing, and testing these assertions can illuminate theory, research, and practice related to employability and strategic HRM.

A dynamic view of employability is illuminated further using the concepts of *inertia* and *asymmetric influence*. Inertia involves the idea that some phenomena are difficult to change. Kirves et al. (2014) unknowingly illustrated inertia in their longitudinal person-centered study that found employability to be stable over time, even when examined in contexts wrought with change. We further assert that inertia can be applied to employability itself or to constructs influencing employability (see Cronin & Vancouver, 2018). Our rationale is that if employability has inertia, this questions the assumptions and findings of studies suggesting that employability is malleable or easily changed. For instance, studies have often assumed that employer investments lead to “quick wins” in employee employability, which in turn leads to quick performance gains. Such considerations need to be considered, and veracity tested, as confirming or refuting these assumptions can have

fundamental implications for a large section of employability research. Inertia can also be related to other constructs that influence employability, such as employee loyalty, organizational career opportunities, or external labor market conditions. The notion of inertia helps to explain why careers are more often characterized by stability rather than change, despite individuals' desire to make a career change (Verbruggen & De Vos, 2020).

Asymmetric influence comprises the idea that factors that increase employability are not necessarily the same factors that decrease employability. To illustrate, employability studies have often seen employer investments as a way to increase employability; for instance, studies on vulnerable workers have assumed that the lack of such investments depletes employability. However, such suppositions need empirical testing, as it is entirely possible that a lack of investment has no effect on the employability levels of these individuals. To further make the point, being fired can send a negative signal to future employers and thus harm the fired individual's employability, whereas never having been fired does not increase one's employability. Analogously, being in temporary employment is often seen as a negative signal. However, for a vulnerable worker, being in permanent employment is not necessarily a positive signal (e.g., De Cuyper, De Witte, & Van Emmerik, 2011).

When considering inertia and asymmetric influence simultaneously, questions arise not only as to what increases or depletes employability, but also as to whether both processes follow the same pace. For instance, employability-enhancing activities may only increase employability in the long run, while being fired is a career shock and can instantly decrease employability. Obviously, the notions of feedback loops, inertia, and asymmetric influence depict a much more complex picture and require more advanced research, such as studies with multiple waves of data, true longitudinal designs, and cross-lags. We advocate for such efforts to refine and advance employability theory, research, and practice.

Critical Issue 3—Inadequate Theorizing

Common to both our broad and focused reviews is the insufficient use of theory. We either found theory to be absent altogether, or to have been interpreted and applied narrowly. Human capital theory, for instance, was the most frequently used in employee-centric research, and despite explicitly accounting for exchanges between the two stakeholders, it was

most often applied only from one direction (the employee or the employer) in any particular study. As an example, researchers have examined how employer investments in human capital lead to employee benefits, but not how these same investments benefit the employer (De Vos et al., 2011; Drange et al., 2018; Groot & Maasen van den Brink, 2000; Van der Heijden, Boon et al., 2009). Conversely, studies using the resource-based view of the firm (Boxall, 1999) have illuminated the employer's perspective, and accordingly argued that competency management is a strategic HRM tool for competitive advantage (e.g., De Vos et al., 2015). Studies, however, have yet to test the implicit assumption that what benefits the organization will also benefit the employee (Guest, 2017).

SET (Blau, 1964) has been commonly used in research either testing or implying reciprocity between employers and employees. Most studies adopting this perspective, however, highlighted how employer investments in employability lead to mutual gains; that is, enhanced employability for employees and loyalty and performance for employers (Camps & Torres, 2011; Philippaers, De Cuyper, & Forrier, 2017). Similar mechanisms were discussed in empirical work on temporary workers (Chambel & Sobral, 2011; Chambel et al., 2015). Other studies presented employability as an employee asset for performance that instigates investments from the organization (De Cuyper, Mauno et al., 2011; Hahn & Kim, 2018).

Studies using SET are encouraging in the sense that they have highlighted both the employee and employer perspectives, as well as the input and output side of the exchange relationship. However, the employer–employee relationship has been examined not as a series of interdependent exchanges over time, but instead as isolated exchanges in which the employee is either independent from the employer or entirely dependent on the employer. To illustrate, scholarly work has concluded that employable workers are “tempted” to pursue excellent performance only when employers invest in the relationship, while they easily withdraw when such investments are insufficient (De Cuyper, Mauno et al., 2011; De Cuyper, Van der Heijden et al., 2011). This conclusion assumes that employees are entirely in control and can act independently of employer actions (investments). Conversely, studies involving temporary and older workers have suggested that those workers are entirely dependent on the employer, such that the employer can refrain from making investments seemingly without any

costs. The assumption of independence is surprising, given that interdependence is at the heart of social exchange (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005).

To conclude, we see three critical issues that, if addressed appropriately, will help advance employability research. The first critical issue concerns the need to include both the employee and employer view. While the employee view has been well-covered, the employer view has attracted comparatively little attention, and their simultaneous consideration has received virtually no attention. Concurrent consideration is needed to understand how each party brings their own interests to the employment relationship and how those interests can be aligned. A second critical issue focuses on the need to understand employability as an integral part of an evolving employment relationship, one that is a dynamic process and explicitly considers time—past, present, and future. A third critical issue pertains to the lack of theoretical rigor and coherence. Theories used in existing research address the employment relationship, but typically from the view of only one party. This work has therefore neglected the interdependency inherent in many employment relationships today.

Thankfully, part of the solution to these issues emerged from our review. We contend that by more fully developing and applying SET to employability research scholars will not only mitigate the aforementioned issues but will also be able to integrate this work within and between disciplines (Goal 3). To this end, in the final section of our paper we explicate means for integrating existing employability research. We first describe how SET serves as an underlying integrating mechanism for employability research, and then show how this can be used in a framework grounded in strategic HRM that explicitly considers both employer and employee perspectives.

GOAL 3: INTEGRATING AND ADVANCING EMPLOYABILITY RESEARCH

Management research has generally substantiated the important influence that the context has on the individual, as well as the effect of the individual on the context (e.g., Schneider, 1987). This means that focusing on either the employer or the employee while ignoring the other is problematic, and presents a true opportunity for future employability researchers. The interdependent relationship and critical roles of these respective stakeholders strongly suggest an exchange relationship. Accordingly, we

contend that SET is an effective and appropriate means for integrating diverse streams of employability research, as well as serving as a call to researchers to explicitly consider both employer and employee perspectives in their studies. The following explication is not presented as a (new) theory of employability but is instead intended to make explicit what has heretofore largely only been implied, or insufficiently developed and applied, in existing research. We begin by outlining three core elements of SET and then describe how these elements are foundational to employability within the employee–employer relationship. Next, we identify the gaps and explicate the relevance of each element for current employability research.

Social Exchange Theory as a Foundation for Employability

Employees and employers engage in a series of interdependent interactions in which each participant provides something the other values (Mitchell, Cropanzano, & Quisenberry, 2012), and the same is true in employability research. Three elements can be used to characterize these exchanges: (a) resources exchanged (inducements and contributions), (b) backward- and forward-looking exchanges, and (c) the processes of exchange. Employers and employees exchange resources, such that employer inducements are provided for employee contributions, and employee contributions, in turn, motivate additional employer inducements (Coyle-Shapiro & Shore, 2007). Employers offer an array of employability-enhancing investments, such as job design (learning value of the job, job quality), aspects tied to the supervisor (e.g., Leader-Member Exchange [LMX], attitude toward older workers, leadership, support for training and development, and general support), overall climate (general, age-supportive, employability culture, learning climate), as well as career management. Employees, in turn, make various contributions in the form of positive attitudes, such as job satisfaction (De Cuyper, Notelaers, & De Witte, 2009), affective organizational commitment (Chambel et al., 2015; De Cuyper, Notelaers, & De Witte, 2009; Espada & Chambel, 2013; Philippaers et al., 2017), workgroup commitment (Philippaers et al., 2017), as well as desirable employee behaviors—in-role performance (Camps & Torres, 2011; Hahn & Kim, 2018), extra-role efforts (Hahn & Kim, 2018), and reduced counterproductive work behaviors (Philippaers et al., 2017).

The various inducements and contributions are conceived as backward- or forward-looking exchanges (Cook, Cheshire, Rice, & Nakagawa, 2013). Backward-looking exchanges are based on reinforcement

principles, such that one's reactions are based on something that was received in the past, and forward-looking exchanges are based on the anticipation of future rewards. The employer-centric perspective, building on strategic HRM, adopts utilitarian economic thinking and comprises forward-looking exchanges (i.e., the expectations of productive employees). The central strategic questions for employers are whether and which employability-related investments in employees will lead to future organizational benefits (e.g., De Vos & Dries, 2013; Lepak & Snell, 1999). This perspective does not sufficiently consider implications for the employee, such as whether the employee actually values or benefit from the employer investments. In contrast, the reciprocity perspective in employability research is mostly about backward-looking exchanges. Employees, for instance, show commitment because of past employer investments in employability (e.g., Camps & Torres, 2011; Chambel et al., 2015; Philippaers et al., 2017), or employers invest because of past employee contributions (Fleischmann & Koster, 2018).

The lack of attention paid to forward-looking exchanges is surprising since employability (and human capital) concerns an individual's future potential (Forrier et al., 2018; Philippaers et al., 2017). Moreover, employee contributions to the relationship are not only driven by past employability enhancements but also by expected future investments and career opportunities. To clarify, we are not recommending that future employability researchers use forward-looking exchanges to replace backward-looking exchanges; instead, we advocate consideration of both types of social exchanges simultaneously. Furthermore, considering the dynamic approach explicated above, the mechanisms explaining backward- versus forward-looking employability exchanges may differ (Cronin & Vancouver, 2018).

Exchange processes are a function of the degree of reciprocity between employer and employee. Both parties are interdependent, yet this interdependence does not necessarily mean balance, as one party may be more dependent on the relationship than the other, and consequently invest disproportionately (Tsui, Pearce, Porter, & Tripoli, 1997). Employability researchers have pursued two paths. One portrays employees as seemingly independent (Forrier et al., 2018) and aligned with new career models in which employees are no longer tied to employers (e.g., the boundaryless career [Arthur, 1994] and the protean career [Hall, 2004])—they withdraw from the employment relationship when employer investments in their employability are deemed unsatisfactory.

Investigations of the relationship between employability and turnover intentions and behaviors are illustrations of this idea (e.g., Berntson et al., 2010; De Cuyper, Mauno et al., 2011; Nauta, Van Vianen, Van der Heijden, Van Dam, & Willemsen, 2009; Nelissen et al., 2017). The other research path highlights how vulnerable workers depend on their employers to support their employability (e.g., Forrier & Sels, 2003b; Hakansson & Isidorsson, 2015; Lindsay et al., 2013; Van der Heijden et al., 2009). The distressing plight of these employees is intensified when their current employer does not invest in their employability (Forrier et al., 2018).

Social Exchange Theory as a Means for Integrating and Advancing Employability Research

The core elements of SET have been insufficiently considered in existing employability research. We thus posit that a more complete application could enhance theoretical rigor pertaining to employability research, and facilitate efforts to overcome the critical issues outlined under Goal 2. Moreover, a social exchange approach may also assist in integrating human capital and strategic HR approaches in employability research, which we contend is both valuable and necessary to advance employability research in the future. In the following paragraphs, we elaborate how researchers might apply the core elements of SET to advance employability research (see also Figure 1).

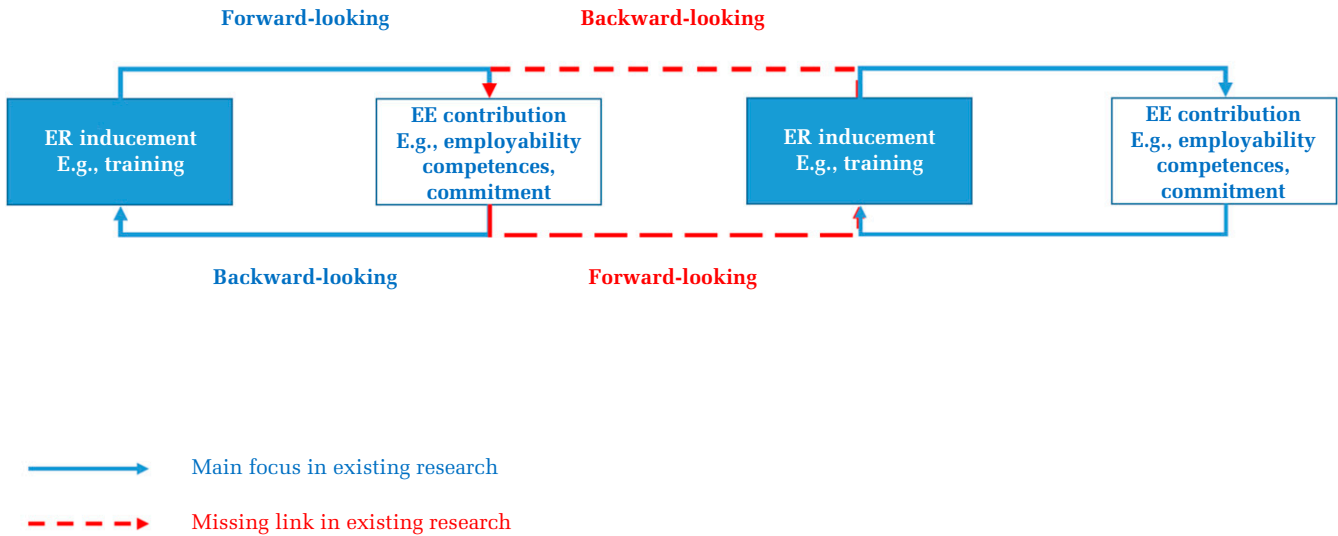
First, while the resources of exchange have been examined by employability researchers, the employer's view has been largely absent. For example, one stream of studies started from the idea that the employee is grateful for employability investments made by the employer and reciprocates with positive attitudes and behaviors. What remains unknown is why, under which conditions, and toward whom the employer is more or less inclined to provide inducements, and for which categories of employees, or under which conditions, these inducements might result in desired employee contributions. A second stream of research has seen employability as a personal resource that employees bring to the employment relationship and for which they expect a return. Employability has been framed in terms of an individual's competencies (Van der Heijde & Van der Heijden, 2006; Van der Heijden, Notelaers et al., 2018), individual differences (Fugate et al., 2004), or perceptions (De Cuyper & De Witte, 2011; Rothwell & Arnold, 2007). However, little is known about whether, and which, competencies,

individual differences, or perceptions are valued by current or prospective employers, and how this is affected by (changes in) the broader socioeconomic and labor market context. This is fundamentally problematic in our view, and considerations of both parties to the exchange should be acknowledged and explored in future research.

Second, social exchange relationships develop over time through the mechanisms of both backward- and forward-looking exchanges. The vast majority of existing studies have investigated employees looking back on past inducements, and how these relate to their attitudes and behavior. However, employee contributions are also based on expected future investments and career opportunities. It is certainly reasonable to expect that some employees are committed to their employers due to past investments or even anticipated future investments (Cook et al., 2013). Temporary workers, for instance, may be committed based on the anticipation of securing a permanent job (e.g., Chambel et al., 2015). Employer-centric studies have implied forward-looking exchanges as employers see qualified employees' future potential, as noted in the strategic HRM literature (e.g., De Vos & Dries, 2013). During tight labor markets, however, employers benefit not only from investing in those with future potential but also from rewarding past behavior and creating a sense of loyalty. In short, both backward- and forward-looking exchanges, from both parties, more accurately reflect reality. Considering these facts is a means for valuable advances in future research.

Third, the degree of employee and employer reciprocity over time shapes the quality of the employment relationship. High-quality social exchange relationships can trigger positive reinforcing cycles or balancing cycles; conversely, low-quality social exchange relationships may trigger negative reinforcing cycles. Positive reinforcing cycles are more likely in interdependent social exchange relationships. For example, an employer may repeatedly invest in those with high potential with the expectation or hope that this will bind them to the organization and thus reap a return. Yet, employer investments may ultimately attenuate if they fear that continued investment might increase the perceived risk of losing these high-potential individuals to other employers. This means that positive reinforcing cycles may be limited, causing employers to carefully consider their employability investments. In such instances, positive reinforcing cycles may turn into balancing cycles, leading to an equilibrium in inducements and contributions. Negative reinforcing

FIGURE 1
Employability-Related Social Exchanges



cycles, in contrast, are more likely in imbalanced exchanges in which one party to the employment relationship is more dependent on the other party, than vice versa. Several employability scholars have expressed concerns related to underinvestment in employability enhancement for particular groups (for a general discussion, see Forrier et al., 2018), such as temporary (e.g., Forrier & Sels, 2003b) and older (e.g., Van der Heijden et al., 2016) workers.

To summarize, we see three ways to advance employability research using the concept of social exchange. First, the use of SET compels researchers to directly consider both the employee and the employer and thus overcome the absence of the employer found in existing research (Critical issue 1). If researchers consider the actual exchanges between employers and employees, they will likely be motivated to explicitly identify particular characteristics (e.g., competencies, dispositions, and perceptions), policies, and practices valued by each party. Second, SET highlights that exchanges between employees and employers occur over time, and that the associated exchanges can be both backward- and forward-looking. This dynamic view contrasts with the relatively static, unidirectional perspective that has dominated existing research (Critical issue 2). Third, the use of SET can add more theoretical rigor to employability research (Critical issue 3). In the next section, we build on the above recommendations by presenting and unpacking the Strategic Employability Architecture (SEA), a framework intended to

extend the utility of SET and assist in bridging the employer–employee divide in employability research.

INTEGRATING EMPLOYER AND EMPLOYEE PERSPECTIVES USING THE STRATEGIC EMPLOYABILITY ARCHITECTURE

The SEA framework (Figure 2) is an adaptation of the human resource architecture developed by Lepak and Snell (1999, 2002), and it furthers our understanding of the interdependency between employers and employees and the nature of the exchanges between them. Lepak and Snell argued that an employee’s uniqueness—the extent to which others in the available labor market possess similar knowledge, skills, abilities, and other characteristics (KSAOs)—and contribution to competitiveness (potential to impact critical organizational objectives) are the basic means for valuing and differentiating human capital and guiding strategic investments in human resources (see also Miles & Snow, 1984). These, in turn, are key determinants of the nature of the relationship between employers and their employees (see also Kang, Morris, & Snell, 2007). Crossing these two dimensions results in a 2 × 2 matrix with four types of employer–employee relationships—commitment (high uniqueness and high competitiveness contribution), acquisition (low uniqueness and high competitiveness contribution), contract (low uniqueness and low competitiveness contribution), and alliance

FIGURE 2
Strategic Employability Architecture

Uniqueness of Employability Attributes High Low	Employability Mode: Alliance Q4	Employability Mode: Commitment Q1
	<p><u>Employability Attributes of Employee(s):</u> High uniqueness and low competitiveness contribution</p> <p><u>Employer Inducements:</u> Selective investments when organizational benefit is clear; support limited and prescribed; resources often external; retention-based investments</p> <p><u>Employee Role:</u> Employee-initiated and driven; look for synergies and niche opportunities to utilize unique attributes</p> <p><u>Expectations:</u> Limited expectations by both parties</p> <p><u>Employability Focus:</u> External</p> <p><u>Employer–Employee Relationship:</u> Relational and unbalanced (in favor of employee)</p>	<p><u>Employability Attributes of Employee(s):</u> High uniqueness and high competitiveness contribution.</p> <p><u>Employer Inducements:</u> Employability development is a priority; employer assumes primary responsibility; provides resources and assumes costs; commitment-based investments</p> <p><u>Employee Role:</u> Active engagement; organizationally oriented</p> <p><u>Expectations:</u> Expect and provide commitment (both parties)</p> <p><u>Employability Focus:</u> Internal</p> <p><u>Employer–Employee Relationship:</u> Relational and reciprocal interdependence</p>
	Employability Mode: Contract Q3	Employability Mode: Acquisition Q2
	<p><u>Employability Attributes of Employee(s):</u> Low uniqueness and low competitiveness contribution</p> <p><u>Employer Inducements:</u> Employability development low priority; enhancements are supported only if high impact for employer</p> <p><u>Employee Role:</u> Primary responsibility resides with employee; opportunities likely external to employer</p> <p><u>Expectations:</u> Low expectations for both parties</p> <p><u>Employability Focus:</u> External</p> <p><u>Employer–Employee Relationship:</u> Transactional and balanced (neither is over-invested)</p>	<p><u>Employability Attributes of Employee(s):</u> Low uniqueness and high competitiveness contribution</p> <p><u>Employer Inducements:</u> “Buys” employability attributes externally rather than developing internally; investments are employer specific and possibly contingent; expect and provide opportunities</p> <p><u>Employee Role:</u> Opportunistic; identify existing and mutually beneficial development opportunities</p> <p><u>Expectations:</u> Low expectations for both parties</p> <p><u>Employability Focus:</u> Internal</p> <p><u>Employer–Employee Relationship:</u> Transactional and unbalanced (in favor of employer)</p>

Note: Q = Quadrant.

(high uniqueness and low competitiveness contribution). Lepak and Snell (2002) used these modes as the basis for describing the nature of the employer–employee relationship at the organizational level, as well as various types of human resource practice configurations appropriate for each

employment mode. We modified and applied Lepak and Snell’s (2002) work to create the SEA framework, and we explain in the following section how it uses SET to help integrate and inform employability research from both the employer and employee perspectives.

The Strategic Employability Architecture

Paralleling that of Lepak and Snell (2002), our underlying premise is that individuals' employability attributes are valuable to the extent that they are unique (other available employees do not possess the same set of attributes) and contribute to an organization's competitiveness. However, we extend Lepak and Snell's (2002) employer-centric view to describe the employees' perspective, thereby providing a means for understanding and studying employability in the context of the employer–employee relationship as a dynamic series of exchanges over time, each party anticipating, reacting to, and shaping the other's actions (i.e., using inducements and contributions through backward- and forward-looking exchange).

The SEA is intended to guide future employability research in three principle ways. First, the SEA helps contextualize employability research within the dynamic and interdependent employee–employer relationship. We contend that to advance the field, future employability researchers need to purposefully examine employability within the context of employer–employee relationships in which it resides. Employability is valuable to neither party independent of the other. Second, the SEA provides a theoretically grounded means for explicitly and simultaneously considering both employer and employee interests and investments in employability. As we have argued extensively above, joint consideration of these stakeholders is essential to realize the potential of employability for research, theory, and practice. Third, the SEA outlines the nature of, and bases for, employer–employee exchanges. We argued above that the content and perceived value of exchanges between employees and employers have heretofore been rather crude (e.g., training or education benefits), or simply implied. The SEA will help researchers to add fidelity to these exchanges, enabling them to more precisely hypothesize and test the substance of employability and its value to both employers and employees. Each of the four employability modes and associated characteristics is discussed next and illustrated in Figure 2.

Commitment employability mode. A *commitment* employability mode (Figure 2, Quadrant 1 [Q1]) is characterized by employees with highly unique attributes that also contribute to the organization's competitiveness. From an employer's view, those profiles are of strategic value and warrant significant and direct employer inducements and further development. Inducements commonly take the

form of investments described as high-performance work systems, and are intended to increase productivity and effectiveness toward organizational goals, while also enhancing employee commitment and retention (Beltran-Martin, Roca-Puig, Escrig-Tena, & Bou-Llugar, 2008). For their part, employees expect or anticipate inducements based on KSAOs they bring to the employment relationship. These same employees are likely to have other attractive and attainable opportunities in the external labor market, and are also likely to seek employers who will meet their expectations by utilizing their skills and experience and committing to further development.

This mode leads to a process in which employers' inducements serve to attract employees with strategically relevant human capital, while employees gain direct and meaningful employability investments. Moreover, employees may look back and increase contributions (e.g., commitment) in an attempt to reinforce employer inducements and facilitate positive reinforcing cycles. It is also possible, or even reasonable, that employers limit their investments once employees are on board to minimize losses associated with employee turnover, so that ultimately balance is achieved (see our earlier discussion on the employability paradox).

Acquisition employability mode. An acquisition employability mode (Figure 2, Q2) represents an employment relationship in which employees' KSAOs are highly impactful on the organization's competitiveness, yet readily available in the external labor market. An employer may be inclined to hire employees who already possess these skills, rather than to invest resources to further develop the employability of these individuals. By doing so, an organization can reap the employability benefits immediately (upon hire) without incurring unnecessary development and other costs. Employees may make considerable employability investments to ensure that their KSAOs remain valuable for a specific employer, particularly in view of the many likely employee competitors in the external labor market. The result is that employees contribute relatively more than the employer to the employment relationship. Taking a process view, the employer may cater to the employees' desire or need for employability enhancement, thereby reciprocating employees' inducements while at the same time maximizing their own gains (i.e., keeping employees motivated without incurring excessive risk).

Contract employability mode. Q3 in Figure 2 describes the *contract* employability mode, wherein an individual's employability attributes are neither

unique in the labor market nor impactful to an organization's competitiveness. These scenarios suggest that employers would provide few inducements (i.e., make little investment in employability-enhancing practices for these employees), and the relationship would be largely transactional, if not literally contractual—with precise specification of tasks and limited or flexible relationship duration. Employees, therefore, should expect development to be self-initiated and likely external to the organization. Paradoxically, employees in this predicament often find themselves dependent on the employer for employment, and over time this may create negative self-reinforcing cycles wherein less value begets less investment, and so on.

Alliance employability mode. An alliance employability mode is exemplified by employees whose attributes may be quite unique in the available talent pool, while making relatively little contribution to their organization's competitiveness (Figure 2, Q4). At first glance, one might conclude that employees with such attributes will garner employer inducements; however, like the attributes themselves, such investments typically do not sufficiently contribute to organizational competitiveness, and thus are limited (see Lepak & Snell, 1999). This may lead organizations to invest in employability enhancements and provide some retention-oriented rewards to benefit from these employees' unique skills, but these will be limited to opportunities with specific benefits to the organization (e.g., a new product or service, new software, a special project). Stated otherwise, these investments are not optimal per se in the light of actually contributing to the employability enhancement of the employee over time, thus possibly endangering their career sustainability. Nevertheless, the alliance mode often generates relational employer–employee arrangements that are built upon principles of reciprocity and forward- and backward-looking exchanges, yet only for a small sample of employees with unique employability attributes. To clarify, even though a particular employer may not view the specific employee's skills as central to its competitiveness, the fact remains that the skills are relatively rare in the market, and in case the organizational benefit is clear, although limited, the employer will support their development via selective investments. This should afford the employee external opportunities as well, and if they are unsatisfied and desire an employer who is more committed to their development, they are likely to leave.

ENSURING THE FUTURE DOES NOT REPEAT THE PAST: AN AGENDA FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Our broad (Goal 1) and focused (Goal 2) reviews of the employability literature clearly revealed multiple insights, notably a lack of integration of employee and employer perspectives (Critical Issue 1: Segregated Stakeholders), insufficient consideration of dynamism and time in the employer–employee relationship (Critical Issue 2: Blind to Inherent Dynamism), and deficient theoretical development and application (Critical Issue 3: Inadequate Theorizing). We aimed to guide and advance employability research by addressing these issues, and in the process we articulated how SET is foundational to our recommendations (Goal 3). When combined with the SEA, our paper provides conceptually sound guidance for future research to advance employability literature, while at the same time discouraging the continuation of clearly established shortcomings. Building on this, we present a future research agenda based on two central themes—interdependence and dynamism.

One Without the Other? Employer–Employer Interdependence

The case we have made throughout this paper is that the employer–employee relationship is a matter of exchanges—employer inducements for employee contributions and vice versa. While these exchanges are mutual, they may not always be equal. Each party provides and expects something from the other, and the perceived value of what one party offers determines the level of investment or contribution by the other party. The SEA framework helps to illuminate the characteristics of these exchanges. Employers seek to enhance organizational competitiveness by inducing or otherwise developing employees with strategically relevant employability attributes, and the nature and quantity of employer inducements is partly a function of the value and availability of relevant employability attributes in the labor market. For their part, employees look for ways to enhance their employability and fulfill their own career aspirations. The uniqueness and contribution to competitiveness of current and prospective employers further influences the extent to which employees are dependent on inducements of their employer to achieve their job and career goals. The degree of sustainability in the resulting employer–employee relationship is determined by the dynamic interplay

of these factors. Using this as background, we appeal to researchers to explicitly acknowledge and examine the interdependencies between both parties in terms of employability development. To this end, we offer two pointed suggestions that emerged from our review.

First, we implore researchers to verify or refute the heretofore implied or assumed link between employability and organizational competitiveness. This is similar in many ways to the challenges human resources scholars have confronted in substantiating the claim talent is a strategic imperative. The SEA framework provides guidance on this very point by showing when (i.e., under which conditions) employability investments from the employer afford competitive advantage. For example, within a commitment employability mode (high uniqueness and high competitiveness contribution), employers may make investments intended to retain employees with unique and strategically relevant profiles to the organization. The SEA framework also helps assuage concerns addressed in the employability paradox literature that investing in employability precipitates turnover and diminishes organizational competitiveness. Within an acquisition employability mode (low uniqueness and high competitiveness contribution), such employee attributes are abundant in the labor market, attenuating employers' concerns of involuntary turnover, but perhaps instead motivating these same employees to contribute with appropriate inducements. Yet, employers may not be concerned about employee turnover as employee attributes are abundant in the labor market (i.e., can easily be replaced). Overall, we believe a valuable track for future employability research is to explore which employability attributes are valuable (unique and contribute to competitiveness) within a particular job and organization. Such details and understanding would not only test the veracity of our assertions and recommendations but also prove extremely valuable to realizing the value of employability for both employee- and employer-oriented research.

Second, the SEA has particular value for researchers interested in particular employee groups. The first group pertains to employees characterized as having careers largely independent of their employers, who also are responsible for their own development and career sustainability. The second group focuses on vulnerable employees who are highly dependent on their employers for their future employability. These groups correspond to the alliance and the contract employability modes,

respectively, within the SEA. The SEA framework identifies two additional employee groups that have been unnoticed in recent employability research and may have different employability stakes. Notably, large numbers of employees still find themselves in traditional careers, characterized by a commitment employability mode, and rely on their employer for development and opportunities. These employees are not free agents that have attracted considerable academic and popular press over the past two or three decades, but instead value employers who are committed to their employability development and have the expectation that the employer will continue to be so over time.

The acquisition employability mode is another that has received little attention from researchers. Here, employees have valuable employability attributes and might thus easily move to another employer, but because their KSAOs are highly important for organizational competitiveness, those employees might want to stay because of expected future employability investments. More generally, the SEA framework can enhance understanding of what is at stake for employees, and how those stakes influence their contributions. Researchers who pursue such contributions are also encouraged to be mindful of and consider internal *and* external labor markets, as both are important to evaluate the availability of particular employability attributes.

Finally, the main asset of the SEA framework is the simultaneous consideration of employee and employer interests, the associated inducements and contributions for each party, and the potential (im)balance between them. Our review revealed great disparities in not just the (perceived) employability of workers but also in the investments made in their employability by employers. Such differences were epitomized in research related to vulnerable workers. Given these findings, future research based on the SEA framework could identify specific—that is, the most relevant—inducements and contributions for a particular situation. A valuable contribution could also be to obtain more insight regarding the conditions under which employability investments are actively shared or made in concert between employers and employees. The SEA framework outlines specific characteristics or elements on which to base such shared arrangements. Examinations of such coordinated or collaborative efforts between employers and employees would not only be groundbreaking and valuable but also an excellent opportunity for those interested in action research or field experiments. These designs would

reflect the tailored focus for HRM practices advocated by Lepak and Snell (2002), and would provide a robust test for the role of idiosyncratic deals in employability research.

Changing Employability Modes Over Time—Capturing the Inherent Dynamism

Our review and associated critique clearly established that employability research has been blind to the inherent dynamism in the employer–employee relationship. Our elaboration of the SET, paying attention to both backward- and forward-looking exchanges, establishes the important but often insufficiently considered role of time. Employability, like the employment relationship in which it is embedded, extends from the past to the future. Hopefully, our paper articulates both the need and the path for future studies that explore a more dynamic perspective. To this end, we delineated three dynamic processes identified by Cronin and Vancouver (2018)—feedback loops, inertia, and asymmetric influence—and explicate potential applications to employability.

Feedback loops offer a conceptually grounded means for linking employer inducements and employee contributions, such that they form reinforcing or balancing cycles. Examination of such feedback loops is needed to determine whether, why, and under what conditions they might vary between different employability modes. For example, a commitment mode may lead to a positive reinforcing cycle. Employers, for instance, may invest in the employability of employees with particularly relevant skill sets in order to retain them, which will presumably enhance the same individuals' employability and thus motivate still greater future investment. A contract mode, on the contrary, may lead to a negative reinforcing cycle wherein employers perceive little value in investing in particular employees. Over time, a lack of investment may result in these individuals' employability diminishing further still, making them vulnerable in the internal (and external) labor market. Reinforcing cycles, both positive and negative, are unstable because they portend continued growth or loss. Further research is needed to explore these suppositions, including the means and situations in which to interrupt such cycles and turn them into more stable balancing cycles.

Feedback loops can also help to explain why employability modes may change over time. The commitment employability mode, for instance, may result in a positive spiral of employer inducements and

employee contributions over time, such that these employees' employability attributes become so focused and refined to the idiosyncrasies of a given employer that they become less valuable in the external market. In this scenario, commitment and reciprocity could potentially make certain employees less employable, more dependent, and more vulnerable over time. This phenomenon has been described under the notion of the locked-in effect (Stengård, Bernhard-Oettel, Berntson, Leineweber, & Aronsson, 2016). Ultimately, an employer may diminish investments and further deplete the employee's internal employability, thus shifting to a contract employability mode. More generally, we encourage researchers to explore the various situations in which an employment relationship may evolve over time from one employability mode to another due to the inherent dynamic processes.

Next, investigations of inertia can further illuminate and advance a dynamic perspective of employability. Although the notion of inertia explains why some phenomena are difficult to change, the question remains as to whether inertia is a characteristic of employability, and if so, whether employability is more or less malleable than has been portrayed in existing research. Relatedly, we then need to identify and understand which contextual factors influence this inertia, such as career management programs and job transitions. It would also be valuable to understand the relationship between inertia and different employability modes. Inertia, for instance, may be more likely to be an aspect of factors influencing employability in a commitment mode than in a contract or alliance mode. A commitment employability mode creates a safe and predictable environment for employees with well-established and stable career systems. These factors could presumably help to stabilize employability. In a contract mode or an alliance mode, employees may experience less predictable external labor market conditions, meaning that the value of their KSAOs, and thus also their perceived employability, might be more volatile. Seasonal workers, whose skills may only be needed during specific periods of the year, illustrate this scenario. We encourage future research to investigate whether, how, and why certain employability modes are more prone to inertia than others.

Asymmetric influence is the third intriguing opportunity for employability research. Existing studies have investigated factors (e.g., development, job characteristics, career systems) that enhance employability, and although not actually tested, there

has been a clear implication or assumption that a lack of such factors decrease employability. An additional future research question is therefore how different types of employer inducements may asymmetrically influence—increase versus decrease—employability over time. For example, a promotion may benefit an individual's employability as they will be offered new challenges that stimulate the development of new competencies, while a lack of a promotion (or a missed promotion) may not have the opposite effect of diminishing employability. Here again, differences may exist between different employability modes, as certain modes suggest increasing employability (e.g., commitment mode) and others decreasing employability (e.g., contract mode). Unraveling what enhances and what decreases employability over time in different employability modes, and thereby considering asymmetric influences, offers a promising track for future research.

Before concluding, it is important to note that a dynamic view of employability that includes feedback loops, inertia, and asymmetric influence requires more advanced research questions and designs, such as those with multiple waves of data, valid measures, appropriate time lags, and explicit consideration of particular exchanges between employers and employees. Accordingly, it is our position that the ideas outlined above provide some of the most notable means for meaningfully and significantly advancing the value of employability research, theory, and practice.

CONCLUSION

We hope that our review, critiques, and recommendations both inspire and guide scholars to advance employability research over the next 20 years. Perhaps the most compelling message from our review is that there are two conflicting trends researchers should be mindful of, and should seek to remedy rather than exacerbate. The first trend is the shift toward career self-management due to the demise of the life-long, paternalistic employment relationship. The second trend is the increased view of employees as a genuine and sustainable source of competitive advantage (Vance & Vaiman, 2008). Employability is viewed in the former as a contemporary form of job security and in the latter as an emerging and viable means for strategically managing talent. Caution is warranted in both cases, as they imply the risk of intensifying the growing skills gap and Matthew effect (rich get richer and poor poorer), such that those with already low employability lack

the resources needed to improve their own predicament and are also neglected (i.e., not invested in) by employers, while the converse happens for employees whose attributes are relatively unique and otherwise valuable. This scenario provides even greater justification for integrating multiple stakeholders—not only employees and employers but also education, vocational, and government policies and practices. Collaborative and sustained efforts are necessary to ensure future researchers realize the potential of employability, while not duplicating the pitfalls of the past.

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