

Inter-Organizational Professional Networks as Drivers of Career Outcomes and Organizational Performance: Towards the Post-pandemic Horizon*

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Abstract

The significance of the intangible resources for organizational and individual success results in the necessity to pay attention to employees' inter-organizational professional networks and their impact on the performance of public organizations and career outcomes of employees. Although this issue has given rise to a great deal of interest in recent years, its empirical studies are still scarce. Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to answer the question: what are the relationships between employee inter-organizational professional networks, employability, career success and organizational performance? This purpose is achieved by presenting the results of a survey carried out in the Polish public organizations. A model of the relationships between these factors was analyzed. In light of the results obtained, inter-organizational professional networks emerged as a significant factor influencing employability, intrinsic career success of employees and performance of public organizations.

Keywords: employability; inter-organizational professional networks; career success; organizational performance, public organizations

Introduction

Along with changes in the public sector, new concepts of public management have begun to emphasize the significance of intangible resources for the performance of public organizations. In this context, attention should be paid to the oft-neglected issue of professional networks of employees and their impact on both employee career development and organizational performance. In relation to business organizations, since the 1970s, this subject has aroused a great deal of interest among researchers because professional networks have been considered a channel through which a variety of valuable resources may become available to the organization (Van der Gaag, 2005).

Simultaneously, changes in employment relationships in the public sector mean that professional networks have also begun to stronger influence careers of public workers, who have to face new situations on the demanding labor market. Today, public organizations no longer guarantee job security, and stable, long-term employment has declined. An important challenge, that many public employees have to cope with, is the transformation of public organizations, which often also entails a restructuring of employment. The psychological contract between a public organization and an employee has changed. Nowadays, public organizations expect highly employable individuals who are able to flexibly adjust to the changing organizational needs. On the other hand, in return employees await organizational support for their career development and employability enhancement. In face of ongoing changes, they have to place a high priority on their professional growth and long-term career advancement. Consequently, enhancing employability has started to play a vital role in human resource policy. Given this situation, literature study indicates that employee inter-organizational professional networks are an important condition of employability enhancement and career success (Guo and Baruch, 2021).

It should also be mentioned, that an extensive growth of the IT technology and the COVID-19 pandemic have evidently highlighted the importance of social networks in many aspects of organizational performance as well as individuals' jobs and personal lives. The current situation influences ways of providing employees with developmental support. Organizational boundaries have become more blurred for many employees seek assistance in professional growth. They expand professional relationships to increase their employability and chances of career success. In this demanding situation, for that reason, a better understanding of relationships between employees' inter-organizational professional networks, employability, career success and organizational performance has become more urgent than ever and a highly topical research problem.

The paper probes the following question: what are the relationships between employees' inter-organizational networks, their employability and intrinsic career success and the performance of public organizations? This aim will be achieved by presenting the results of survey research conducted in Polish public organizations. A model exploring the links between these factors listed was tested. On the basis of the results obtained, some implications for career management are also provided.

Theoretical Background and Hypothesis Development

Many definitions and theories of employability have been developed since the emergence of the concept in the mid-1950s. It has been analyzed from various perspectives, e.g. socio-economic, organizational and individual, and in many different contexts, e.g. unemployment, career management, organizations, reorganizations, and so on (Marzec et al., 2021; Van Harten et al., 2022). According to one of the definitions, employability is "an individual's chance of a job on the internal and/or external labor market" (Forrier and Sels, 2003, p. 106). This definition captures the core of the concept, focusing on outcomes of employability; thus, it has been successfully used in many studies representing different research perspectives. However, changes in careers meant that an individual approach to employability has gained great popularity in recent years (e.g., Rodrigues, Butler and Guest, 2020; Van Harten et al., 2020). From this perspective, employability can be considered as an individual capability to successfully deal with the situation on the external and internal labor market determined by specific competencies of an individual (Van Harten et al., 2020; Peeters et al., 2019). This approach entails a shift of control over careers from the organization to the individual (Philippaers, De Cuype and Forrier, 2019). Employability depends on various contextual and individual factors. The literature study points to the professional network as a significant predictor of employability.

An individual professional network is only a part of a bigger social network of an individual. It is characterized by the presence of organizational arrangements connected with the job activity of individuals who cooperate in order to pursue their job tasks exchanging various tangible and intangible resources. It encompasses relationships outside and inside organizations, i.e. inter- and intra-organizational networks (Bozionelos, 2006). An inter-organizational network is based on an individual's relationships outside the organizational boundaries, but it is connected with his/her occupational activity. Its two groups of functions have been distinguished, i.e. instrumental functions related to an individual's career development and expressive functions, which are psychosocial functions (Kram and Isabella, 1985). Both of these functions support the development of employee competencies, hence, it is logical to assume that:

Hypothesis 1: Individual inter-organizational networks will be positively related to the employability of public workers.

A variety of factors influence career success which can be analyzed from objective and subjective perspectives. Intrinsic career success concerns an individual's subjective perception and self-evaluation of his/her career situation. Public employees have to meet numerous demands concerning their competencies and performance. It should be noticed that nowadays, careers in the public sector differ from the former hierarchical model which was characterized by high levels of stability and predictability. The restructuring of public organizations has led to changes in employment contracts, that are evolving towards more contemporary work arrangements. The new career model is based on greater flexibility, adaptability and life-long learning. This situation poses a serious threat for some employees, particularly those with low levels of employability. Consequently, to decrease growing employment insecurity, many public employees look for new opportunities for their competency development to enhance their employability and achieve career success. Therefore, it is reasonable to assume that employability can affect an individual's subjective perception of his/her career situation, what leads to the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 2: The employability of public workers will be positively related to their intrinsic career success.

It should be noted that an evaluation of the performance of public organizations is a complex problem. In business organizations, economic criteria are traditionally dominant. In public organizations, their usefulness is limited because the outcomes of their performance are to a great extent intangible, and the social dimension of their performance is fundamental. They have different priorities and aims than business organizations. Additionally, performance of public organizations also concerns expected outcomes imposed by public policy and policymakers (Van Helden and Reichardt, 2013). Consequently, subjective measures of public organizations' performance have recently become widespread. New

concepts of public management emphasize the significance of human capital as an important factor influencing organizational performance. This premise is based on the statement that any organization needs a competent, highly employable workforce which is able to flexibly adjust to organizational needs in order to perform effectively (Nauta et al., 2009). Moreover, previous research conducted in the Flemish public sector revealed that employability had a positive effect on employee task performance (Philippaers, De Cuype and Forrier, 2019). In turn, a study carried out in the business sector showed that a higher level of employee job performance helps to improve organizational performance (Kahya, 2009). Consequently, it is reasonable to suppose:

Hypothesis 3: The employability of public workers will be positively related to the organizational performance.

An important assumption of the competence-based approach to employability is that improved organizational performance may be achieved by employees, who – in exchange for developmental opportunities – will respond with greater commitment and effort to fulfill organizational aims. This statement is supported by some empirical research. The results of a study of public hospitals in Lahore proved that the career success of employees was related to the performance of the hospitals (Naseer, Mahmood and Kanwal, 2015); while research conducted at public service counters in Dutch municipalities revealed that organizations where employees showed more positive attitudes and behavior in their jobs achieved better organizational performance (Vermeeren, Kuipers and Steijn, 2009). The competence-based approach also allows to resolve the so-called employability paradox which assumes that investments by organizations in employability enhancement lead to the loss of some employees who are easily able to find more attractive employment opportunities (Rodrigues, Butler and Guest, 2020). Intrinsic career success reflects an attitude of employees towards some aspects of their job and career; thus, it is justified to suppose that intrinsic career success can positively affect their job performance what translates into a higher organizational performance. The following hypothesis has been posed:

Hypothesis 4: The intrinsic career success of public workers will be positively related to the organizational performance.

In an international study conducted in the ICT sector in seven European countries (including Poland), it was found that employability mediated the relationships between mentoring and the job performance and career success of ICT specialists (Bozionelos et al., 2016). Individual professional networks accomplish functions similar to mentoring. In some opinions they can even be considered as a specific form of group mentoring (Dansky, 1996). In another study, it was also proved that employability was a mediator of relationships between some developmental practices and the organizational commitment of employees (Rodrigues, Butler and Guest, 2020). Hypotheses H1 and H2, together with hypotheses H3 and H4, are directed towards a mediating role of employability in the relationship between inter-organizational networks and organizational performance as well as between inter-organizational networks and the intrinsic career success of public workers (Fig. 1). It leads to the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis 5a: Employability will mediate the relationships between inter-organizational networks and intrinsic career success.

Hypothesis 5b: Employability will mediate the relationships between inter-organizational networks and the performance of public organizations.

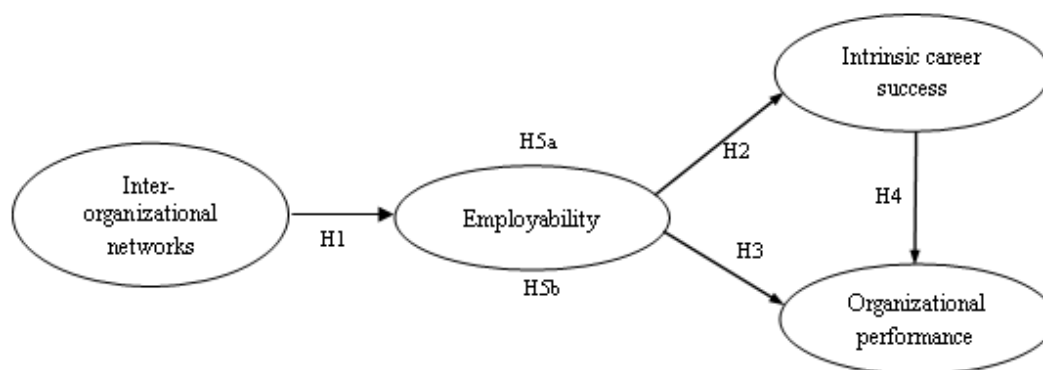


Fig. 1. A Conceptual Model of the Relationships

Source: own study

Method

A survey was conducted in 147 Polish public organizations providing basic types of public services, i.e., labor offices, municipal cultural centers, public health care entities, social welfare centers, primary schools (14 organizations of each

type), municipal offices and family support centers (33 and 44 such organizations respectively due to their diverse sizes measured by the number of employees). The survey was carried out among 566 pairs of employees and their immediate supervisors who assessed the employability of their subordinates to prevent common-method bias. A single supervisor rated from 1 to 3 his/her direct subordinates (according to the size of the organization).

Three-stage sampling was applied, i.e. the kind of public services was the criterion at the first stage; at the next stages the random selection method was used, encompassing the selection of the organizations and participants in the organization.

Due to the specificity of public services, women comprised 81.3% of the sample of subordinates and men 18.7% (in total 566 employees). Their average age was 39.9 years (median 39 years) and the average seniority was 16.5 years (median 15 years). The sample structure according to the 'educational qualifications' of the subordinates can be presented as follows: 61.7% of them held a master's degree, 13.3% a bachelor's degree and 23.5% of the participants had completed secondary education. Workers with lower educational qualifications constituted 1.6% of the sample of subordinates.

The sample of supervisors encompassed 283 people, of whom 72.1% were women. The average age of supervisors was 47.27 years (median 48 years) and the average seniority was 23.56 years (median 24 years). Regarding 'educational qualifications', 86.6% of supervisors held a master's degree, 6% a bachelor's degree, 7.1% of the supervisors had completed secondary education and only 0.4% of supervisors had lower educational qualifications.

Measures

Employability was measured by means of a scale created and validated for the needs of this study (Marzec et al., 2021). The scale encompassed 46 items on eight subscales, namely social competences (e.g., "he/she likes to help resolve conflicts at work"), adaptability (e.g., "he/she quickly adapts to changes in work methods and tools"), civic competences (e.g., "he/she is interested in the social and political problems of a local community"), knowledge and professional skills (e.g., "he/she has professional knowledge which he/she successfully uses in new and atypical situations"), the ability to maintain balance (e.g., "his/her private life and work are balanced"), ethical competences (e.g., "he/she takes responsibility for his/her work"), professional proactivity (e.g., "he/she stays abreast of developments in his/her profession"), and the anticipatory pursuit of professional development (e.g., "he/she conscientiously tries to prepare for future changes in the sector") (Marzec et al., 2021). The scale was developed on the basis of previous operationalizations of employability adjusted to the requirements of public employees (e.g., Van der Heijde and Van der Heijden, 2006; Fugate and Kinicki, 2008; Marzec, 2015). To validate the scale, exploratory and confirmatory factor analyses (EFA, CFA), as well as multitrait-multimethod (MTMM) analysis were used (Shen, 2017). The Cronbach's alpha coefficients varied from 0.90 to 0.95.

To measure the inter-organizational networks, the scale utilized by Bozionelos (2006) was used. It encompassed six items in two subscales, i.e. inter-organizational instrumental and expressive networks (e.g., "there are people outside my organization with whom I share emotional support, job experiences and attitudes"; "I have many friends in various organizations who can help me in the further development of my career"). The Cronbach's alpha coefficients of the subscales were 0.92 and 0.81.

Intrinsic career success was measured by Gattiker and Larwood's scale (1986). It consisted of 23 items on five subscales referring to such dimensions of a career as a job, position, personal relationships, financial and life success. Cronbach's alpha coefficients varied from 0.79 to 0.92.

Organizational performance was measured by means of a scale developed by Wronka (2014), which was based on scales previously developed by Snow (1992) and Cornforth (2001), relying on the subjective evaluation of the two key aspects of performance of public organizations, i.e. the accomplishment of an organizational mission and goals as well as social legitimization of actions.. It consisted of 10 items on two subscales. The Cronbach's alpha of the subscales were 0.89 and 0.94. In all scales applied, the items were rated on a seven-point Likert scale.

Research Results

Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) and the Sobel test were applied to test the formulated hypotheses. In terms of the data processing SPSS 24.0 and Amos 24.0. were used. The Pearson's correlation rates showed that the use of SEM analysis was reasonable. The Pearson's correlation rates clearly showed that the examined variables revealed significant correlations. Theoretically important control variables such as age, educational qualifications and position were not considered in the model, since analyses showed that their impact was not important at the assumed significance level ($p = 0.01$) due to the high level of homogeneity of the sample regarding these criteria (Marzec et al., 2021).

Next, using SEM analysis, the model of the relationships between inter-organizational networks, employability, intrinsic career success and organizational performance was tested (Fig. 1). In its estimation, the method of maximum likelihood (ML) was applied. Because the model assumed is only one of the possible models of the relationships, to assess the goodness of their fit, such popular indicators as the Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA), χ^2/df , the Jöreskog and Sörbom Goodness of Fit Index (GFI), the Comparative Fit Index (CFI), and the Tucker-Lewis Coefficient (TLI) were used.

First, the intended conceptual model of the relationship was examined (Fig. 1). The SEM analysis showed the correctness of the model assumed. The model was characterized by the acceptable level of fit to the empirical data (Table 1). Because it does not denote that it was the best possible model, hence the alternative models were also analyzed (Konarski, 2009). They also considered direct paths between a predictor and outcomes examined. Judge and Colquitt (2004) proved that mediation is confirmed if adding a direct path between the predictor (i.e. inter-organizational networks) and the outcomes (intrinsic career success and organizational performance) will not considerably improve the quality of the model and will not make an indirect path insignificant. Therefore, in the second model (Model 2), the direct relationships between inter-organizational networks and intrinsic career success as well as between inter-organizational networks and organizational performance were taken into account. The analysis showed that the impact of inter-organizational networks on performance was not significant; hence, this path was removed from the model. The third model (Model 3) included the direct path between inter-organizational networks and intrinsic career success (Fig. 2).

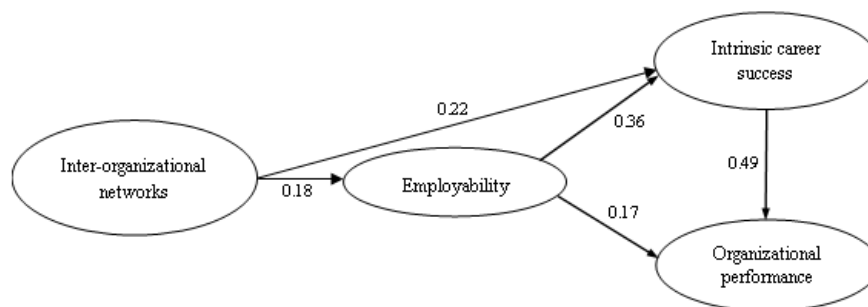


Fig. 2. The Model of the Relationships Examined

Note: The standardized regression weights have been presented in the model. All factor loadings are significant at the 0.01 level.

Source: own study.

The analysis indicated that this model had a slightly better fit to the empirical data than the first and second models (Table 1).

Table 1: The Goodness of Fit of the Estimated Models

| Model | Chi ² | df | p | Chi ² /df | GFI | AGFI | RMSEA | CFI | TLI |
|-----------------------------|------------------|-----|-------|----------------------|------|------|-------|------|------|
| Model 1 | 301.529 | 102 | 0.000 | 2.95 | .941 | .911 | .059 | .962 | .949 |
| Model 2 | 274.702 | 100 | 0.000 | 2,75 | .946 | .917 | .056 | .966 | .954 |
| Model 3 | 274.706 | 101 | 0.000 | 2.72 | .946 | .918 | .055 | .966 | .955 |
| Model 0 (lack of relations) | 5319.217 | 136 | 0.000 | 39.112 | .328 | .244 | .260 | 0 | 0 |

Source: own study.

The analysis of this model revealed that inter-organizational networks had a positive influence on employability ($\gamma = 0.18$; $p < 0.01$) (H1), which in turn positively affected intrinsic career success ($\beta = 0.36$; $p < 0.01$) (H2) and organizational performance ($\beta = 0.17$; $p < 0.01$) (H3). Additionally, it was found that inter-organizational networks had a significant direct impact on intrinsic career success ($\gamma = 0.22$; $p < 0.01$). It was proved that intrinsic career success positively affected organizational performance ($\beta = 0.49$; $p < 0.01$) (H4). However, because the path reflecting the indirect impact of inter-organizational networks on intrinsic career success remained significant and the model was only slightly better fitted to the empirical data than the first one, the hypothesis that employability is a mediator of the relationship between inter-organizational networks and intrinsic career success has also been confirmed (H5a). It was also found that there has been no direct statistically significant impact of inter-organizational networks on organizational performance, but only an indirect one through employability, which proved the last hypothesis (H5b). Additionally, the Sobel test was carried out to check the last hypotheses (H5a and H5b). The results also confirmed H5a (a partial mediation) and H5b (a full mediation) hypotheses, i.e. $Z_5 = 3.25$ ($p < 0.01$), $Z_6 = 2.5$ ($p < 0.01$).

To sum up, the results do not give reasons to reject the posted hypotheses H1-H5. The carried out analyses confirmed the assumed relationships presented in the conceptual model (Fig. 2). The positive relationship between inter-organizational networks and employability was found what allowed to verify the first hypothesis (H1). Next, the results proved that employability positively affected both the employees' intrinsic career success and organizational performance, what supported the second and third hypotheses (H2, H3). Furthermore, the study revealed that inter-organizational networks influenced intrinsic career success of employees directly and indirectly, through their impact on their employability. Also the fourth hypothesis (H4) regarding a positive impact of the career success of employees on the organizational performance was confirmed. The last hypotheses (H5a and H5b) which postulated a mediating role for employability in the relationships of the inter-organizational networks, the employees' intrinsic career and the organizational performance, were also confirmed not only by the path analysis but also the Sobel test.

Discussion and Conclusions

This study generated some important findings: inter-organizational professional networks of employees were indirectly positively related to their intrinsic career success, i.e. through employability, which also moderated the relationships between employee inter-organizational professional networks and organizational performance. Next, it was proved that the employee intrinsic career success positively influenced organizational performance. These results confirmed the hypotheses posed. The study has provided empirical evidence regarding the relationships between employee inter-organizational professional networks, employability, career success and organizational performance, which was hitherto absent in the literature.

These results allow one to link positive organizational and individual outcomes. They are also in line with previous findings showing that employability mediates relationships between some developmental practices and their organizational and individual outcomes such as e.g. career success, job satisfaction, job and organizational performance (e.g., Bozionelos et al., 2016; Marzec et al., 2021; Philippaers, De Cuyper and Forrier, 2019). Additionally, it was established that inter-organizational networks also directly positively affected the employee career success. This finding corresponds to the results of a survey conducted among white-collar workers in the Chinese business sector which showed that employees' professional networks were related to both their objective and intrinsic career success (Bozionelos and Wang, 2007).

In line with the previous studies, the research confirmed the impact of employability on intrinsic career success, but in terms of further research, its relationship to objective career success should also be determined (e.g. Spurk, Hirschi and Dries, 2019). Moreover, the relationships between intra-organizational professional networks and employability, career success and organizational performance should also be examined. This would allow researchers to better recognize the influence of specific features of public organizations on employability enhancement. An expanded hierarchy, a high level of formalization and rigid rules do not encourage cooperation and the establishment of relationships between employees or the development of intra-organizational professional networks in public organizations.

The study also had certain limitations that need to be discussed. First, the data was collected among a sample which was characterized by a high level of homogeneity regarding their demographic features; hence, their potentially moderating impact could not be analyzed. Many studies showed that features such as age, position or educational level may significantly moderate the relationships between employability, its predictors and outcomes. Second, given the focus on the public sector, the use of multistage sampling in further studies was necessary, which has simultaneously raised concern about the generalizability of the results (Van der Heijden and Spurk, 2019).

The results are in consonance with the idea of a networked labor market and the statement that the issues of employees' professional networks should not be neglected in organizations aiming to support employee professional growth and career development. However, their developmental role is particularly important during the Covid-19 pandemic for employees who working from their homes using IT technology look for possibilities to enhance their employability through their professional networks. During this period professional networks of employees have been for many of them an important source of psychosocial support and information.

A crucial concern of contemporary public management is how to improve organizational performance. Nowadays it is also stressed that "employability is a shared responsibility between employees and employers" (Van Harten et al., 2020, p. 1095). The results showed that one of the important ways is to encourage employees to develop their professional networks which provide access to various resources linked with these networks enabling them enhanced cooperation with stakeholders, simultaneously contributing to their employability enhancement, career success and organizational performance.

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