

Exploring the Resources of Sustainable Employability in Pakistani Healthcare Settings:

A Qualitative Study

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Abstract

Sustaining employability in developing countries is a major issue specifically for those working in the private service sector. The factors that contribute to sustainable employability (SE) thus, are an important topic to explore. This study aims to delve deeper into the experience of SE of medical doctors working in the private hospitals of Pakistan. In this regard, an exploratory qualitative design was selected to understand the phenomenon and resources of SE. 20 in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with medical doctors of the private hospitals of Pakistan. Thematic analysis was conducted to form the major themes using Nvivo 12 software. Results showed three major themes perceptions of SE, personal resources, and social support resources. Therefore, this study contributes to the body of knowledge by exploring the relevant importance of the three categories helpful to enhance the SE of doctors.

Keywords: Sustainable Employability, Doctors, Career Competencies, Resources

Introduction

In the recent literature, there is a growing concern about Sustainable Employability (SE) among healthcare workers globally (Roczniewska et al., 2020). The topic is of vital importance for the said population due to the inherent workload, excessive duty hours, and responsibility to deliver quality services (Le Blanc et al., 2017). Thus, sustenance of employability becomes a challenge for healthcare workers (De Lange et al., 2020). Recent studies in western society shed light on the conceptualizations of the SE phenomenon (Hazelzet et al., 2020; Semeijn et al., 2019) however, it is crucial to explore this topic among eastern countries as well. So, this study focuses on the perceptions and experience of SE among Pakistani health care employees and dig deep into its resources. SE has been conceptualized in several ways but still, there is a lack of clear meaning and definition (Fleuren et al., 2020). Generally, it refers to the employees' long-term ability to function effectively in the labor market while also maintain their health and well-being (Fleuren et al., 2020). Recent literature theorizes various factors/resources for SE such as job crafting (Le Blanc et al., (2017), HR practices (Ybema et al., 2020), Resilience (Semeijn et al., 2019), and Social job resources (Roczniewska et al., 2020). In the present paper, findings from interview data also suggested that personal resources are important and can lead to SE if provided with supportive social resources.

This study mainly tries to elucidate the conceptualization of SE through gaining insights from medical doctors of Pakistan working in private hospitals. To explore SE and its resources, a qualitative study design was adopted, and interviews were conducted with medical doctors. Their perspective provides meaningful insights for other young doctors. Therefore, the present study holds a significant contribution for medical practitioners. First, it would help expand the understanding of sustaining and maintaining their employees throughout their careers. Second, they will get to know the required resources for SE. Third, medical practitioners would be better able to define and shape their marketability matched with external market demands of health care. Thus, the primary objective of this study is to explore the conceptualization and key resources for SE of medical doctors of Pakistan.

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Research Questions

Based on the study objectives and above arguments, the research questions for the present study are as follows:

1. What are the doctors' perceptions and experiences of sustainable employability?
2. What are the major determinants of sustainable employability?
3. How do the personal and social resources contribute towards a doctor's experience of sustainable employability?

Literature Review

Semeijn et al., (2019) defined SE as the individual's overall capability and the possibility to continue working by being more motivated and workable (healthy). Further, this concept was also elaborated in the occupational health context having nine compulsory aspects, including, the perceived health status of individuals, fatigue, need for recovery, workability, job satisfaction, work motivation, perceived employability, skill gap, and job performance (Fleuren et al., 2018; Fleuren et al., 2020). The three main dimensions of SE are perceived employability, vitality, and workability (Semeijn et al., 2015; Semeijn et al., 2019; Ybema et al., 2020). Further to this notion, the construct of SE incorporates the process of preservation and attainment of resources for present and future use (De Vos et al., 2018). Similarly, the Conservation of Resources theory (COR) (Hobfoll, 1989) also deals with preserving, gaining, and investment of resources (Hobfoll et al., 2018). The resources may include individuals' strengths as well as their social relations (Hobfoll, 2002), such as their self-efficacy, self-esteem, intelligence, and social support resources (Halbesleben et al., 2014). COR theory also provides insights about resources for SE such as De Vos et al. (2018) recommended that COR theory can be an important theoretical framework to understand the resources necessary for the sustainable growth and continuity of one's career.

Resources for SE have well explained specifically career competencies as the personal resources (Akkermans & Tims, 2017), and the social job resources among healthcare employees (Roczniewska et al., 2020). Previously, Xanthopoulou et al. (2009) suggested that individuals' job resources, as well as their resources, are mutually related and they strengthen each other as well. In line with this, few studies highlighted that personal resources breed job resources or vice versa the presence of job resources reinforces individuals' resources (Bakker & Demerouti, 2018; Bakker et al., 2014). Thus, the framework of the current study also sheds light on the interaction of individual's resources and social support resources leading to develop individual's SE. It can be argued that both personal, as well as social resources, are crucial for SE enhancement.

Methodology

Research design

The purpose of the current study is to explore and understand the concept of SE and its resource, therefore an exploratory qualitative study was adopted (Merriam, 2009) through which the reality can be captured by the viewpoints and experiences of sustainably employable individuals specifically from medical doctors of Pakistan.

Settings and Sampling strategy

According to Patton, (1990), Purposeful sampling is the most appropriate for qualitative studies. Therefore, a non-probability snowball purposive sampling method was used. Following this, the first few key participants were selected as per the criteria established for the study then each participant was be asked to refer to other similar participants. Therefore, initially, participants were targeted based on their ability to provide the details in-depth for the area investigated and then asked to refer other participants who they think provide similar information. Private health care sector professionals are the most appropriate for this study. Specifically, medical doctors are more motivated for improving their employability for lifelong independently from employing institutes (Malik et al., 2010).

Data Collection Techniques

To serve the purpose of the current study, data were collected using semi-structured interviews from 20 doctors from five private hospitals in Pakistan. The questions were kept open-ended for gathering most of the information and focus on the relevant areas identified by the literature review. Sample questions included, have you heard about this concept of employability? In this regard what have you done to sustain your employability? What are your perceptions regarding this phenomenon of sustainable employability? Can you please shed light further on the factors contributing towards your

sustained employability? A structured part of the interview has also been added and constitutes mainly the demographic information from participants. First, permission letters to participate in the interview were sent to the targeted participants to get their consent for participating in the study. After receiving their completed forms, all eligible participants were contacted again to arrange a time and venue for the interview (Smyth et al., 2018). Face-to-face and voice-recorded interviews were conducted and then transcribed into Microsoft word format for initial analysis.

Analysis Method

Thematic analysis is the most appropriate strategy for the qualitative study specifically in the case of studying the perspectives of participants (Creswell, 2007). Therefore, Braun and Clarke (2006)’s six-step by step process of performing thematic analysis was adopted involving, 1) reading the transcripts of interviews in-depth to get familiarize with data, 2) generation of initial codes, 3) searching for similar concepts by analyzing a list of different codes 4) reviewing and refining similar themes, 5) defining and naming themes/ codes and 6) producing the report to give a concise and logical account of data.

This analysis was further facilitated through using software NVivo (12) which will allow to management, organize and analyze textual data efficiently (Bazeley & Richards, 2000). To validate the findings, four criteria to ensure the trustworthiness of data were used which constitute credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Bryman, 2008; Strydom et al., 2005). These four criteria were implemented at each phase of thematic analysis by using a rich and thick description of findings, member checking, reporting negative findings, peer debriefing, and use of external auditor as reported by Nowell et al. (2017).

Results

Interviews were conducted from a total of 20 doctors from various specializations, out of which 10 were females and 10 were male doctors. The demographic information is provided in the below table:

Table 1: Respondents’ Profile

Demographical Characteristics	Total Count	Percentage	
Gender	Male	10	50%
	Female	10	50%
Age	31-40	13	65%
	41-50	02	10%
	51-60	02	10%
	61-70	02	10%
	Above 70	01	5%
Education	MBBS	04	20%
	FCPS	16	80%
Total work experience	10-20	15	75%
	21-30	02	10%
	31-40	01	5%
	41-50	01	5%
	Above 50	01	5%
Specialization or Field	General Medicine	03	15%
	Pediatrics	01	5%
	Gynecology	02	10%
	ENT	02	10%
	Psychology	01	5%
	Ophthalmology	03	15%
	Dermatology	03	15%
	Bariatric	02	10%
	Dentistry	02	10%
	General Surgeon	01	5%

The detailed data analysis following thematic findings revealed three broad categories namely Perceptions of SE, Personal, and Social support resources. Each of these three categories begins with the main themes and their relevant sub-themes. Quotations from participants were further provided as evidence to support each finding. The phrases from respondents were clustered into a similar concept or a theme. It was then coded, categorized, and labeled accordingly. The table below provides an example of theme development:

Table 2: Thematic development of the concepts

Themes	Sub-themes	Supporting evidence by quote
Perceptions of SE	Perceived Employability	"I feel employable and think that I am sustaining it because it is my passion", "I think sustainable employability means that how much you are satisfied" "Yes, I feel employable. I have got enough stamina to work and maintain it very well".
	Work energy (Vitality)	
	Health (Workability)	
	Happy and satisfied	
Personal Resources	Career competencies	"When I started with my career, I decided that I will do something which will take me to the extreme of height. I always focus on the best and try to achieve that. So, I am a passionate person. I focus on things in my profession and set goals".
Social support Resources	Co-workers' social support,	"...You see if even despite your ability and capabilities you cannot be successful in your career if you do not have strong support.... " "Support from my supervisors and colleagues has a major role...." "So, support from your home and ...also from your hospital matters".
	Supervisors' social support,	
	Family social support,	

Theme 1: Perceptions of Sustainable Employability (SE)

All of those interviewed shared common factors related to their SE. They defined SE as having four common aspects including their perceived Employability, Vitality (motivation and their energy), Workability (health), and work and career satisfaction. The following quotes reflected the SE perception of doctors:

"What I perceive about sustained employability is that it's like how I sustained my employment in this specific field through different adaptations". (ID 6)

"I think sustainable employability means that how much you are satisfied and how much your employer under which you are working is satisfied from you. I feel myself capable to work anywhere". (ID 20)

Below are the detailed phrases, representing the dimensions of SE

Perceived Employability

"I think I am an employable person. I think this ability varies from person to person and is related to yourself. I know I am dedicated and want to work. I did not go for this field forcefully and not doing it as a side job. I wanted to be a part of this field, so this motivation level drives from within me. I want to get up and come to work". (ID 17)

"..and yes, I am an employable person. I get up regular on time in the morning as per my routine...I feel myself fit for this job till now and I continue doing my job". (ID 19)

Vitality (work motivation and energy)

"Sometimes a person gets tired after so much work, but it does not affect my motivation and energy". (ID 1)

"Yes, I feel that I am employable in my field because I put so much effort into it. It was my mindset from the very beginning that I must do that. Once you make up your mind for one thing then you put all your energies on that automatically". (ID 11)

Workability (Health)

"I think that till I am fit and healthy I should work. In that case I also take care of my health. See if you are healthy then you should work as much as you can do". (ID 19)

Work and career satisfaction

Previous literature focused on the dimension of employability, vitality, and workability only (Semeijn et al., 2015; Ybema et al., 2020) but this study explored another dimension of work and career-related satisfaction as well. Various respondents described this as:

"I am satisfied with my career because if I look back and compare. I think I have achieved what I wanted, and I am in the field which I liked". (ID 2)

"I liked to do my house job and training in pedes because I feel satisfied when I see little kids getting better after treatment. So that is why I continue with this field". (ID 10)

The following themes represent the resources for SE development. There are two broad categories namely personal and social factors. Recently, Fleuren et al. (2020) also postulated that the SE of the individuals depends on personal and social support resources. The emergent themes include personal resources of career competencies, and Social support resources (from colleagues or wo-workers, seniors, supervisors, and family).

Theme 2: Personal Resources (Career Competencies)

Based on the participants' views, several aspects were categorized together as individual career competencies. Career competencies are defined as the knowledge, skills, and abilities centered on the career development of individuals having dimensions of reflective, communicative, and behavioral competencies (Akkermans & Tims, 2017; Akkermans et al., 2013). The following quotes from interviews described the role of career competencies to enhance SE and depicted in the individuals' motivation, passion, strengths, communicative abilities, knowledge, and skills of the labor market, exploring work opportunities and to attain goals related to their career through continuous learning and updating of skills (Akkermans et al., 2013).

Updating knowledge and skills through continuous learning

"Yes, it is very necessary to update yourself. You must learn with time. Through continuous teaching, you can update your knowledge.... secondly, for your professional skills, you must learn as well. As whenever we went for the operation, we first read the book before going to operation theatre and for new things you must travel for learning". (ID 12)

Communicative competencies

"For me as I said that generally, the way of listening to others and speaking to them, and how you make them understand is important, so your communication skills matters. So, my sustainability depends on how I treat and deal with my patients". (ID 19)

Reflecting self-motives, values, and motivation to excel

"So, when you decide yourself based on your mood and interest then I think it will play a major role in your sustainable employability...knowing yourself and realizing your potential is important.... when you choose a profession according to your capabilities then you will excel". (ID 18)

Reflection on one's strength and communicative competence

"Let me tell you I could be a very good motivational speaker and have very good communication skills which I am not yet publicly, but I think I can do that but due to my professional commitments I could not pursue. And I am a good trainer as well and my trainees love me because of the same reasons. And I think I will be able to contribute to their lives. Because whatever I speak, I speak from my heart and professional acumen". (ID 07)

Behavioral competencies (exploring possibilities)

"We must keep ourselves self-updated. We must do courses and certificates, and workshops. We must do that all and we are continuously doing. See, you should always try to explore your possibilities. Nobody is going to tell you that now what step you must take. You must do it on your own...So, these types of things existed minimally but you must explore other opportunities". (ID 20)

Goal setting and career controlling

"Everybody wants to get the best, so when I started off with my career, I decided that I will do something which will take me to the extreme of height. I always focus on the best and try to achieve that. So, I am a passionate person. I focus on things in my profession and set goals for months, years, and years to come and then try to achieve them". (ID 1)

Theme 3: Social Support Resources

The quotes below clearly depict the importance of social support resources for the SE enhancement:

"...You see if even despite your ability and capabilities you cannot be successful in your career if you do not have strong support...." (ID 7)

Work-related social support

The following quotations depicted the role of work-related Social support (**provided by colleagues/ coworkers, seniors, and supervisors**) to enhance SE.

“...to sustain it, my immediate environment plays a role such as my friends, colleagues have made a group and exerting their joint efforts for this...So, I got a lot of support here from my colleagues, seniors, supervisors as well as juniors too. So, it has a good impact on my employment”. (ID 11)

“...at workplace my colleagues support me in a way that for example if I am working on a research paper and need extra work, they take care of my duties at that time. My seniors always allow me and give me a break or space to achieve some specific goal”. (ID 3)

“This is also a very big blessing if you get a good supervisor and work environment is also comfortable”. (ID 10)

Family social support

It was observed that along with the work-related support provided at the workplace, support from family members also plays a huge role in the SE of doctors. Specifically, this is more likely in the case of female doctors because they must focus on raising children and household responsibilities as well.

“I think we are dependent on others because we need help from family as well. We being females need help for our kids. Otherwise, we cannot continue our career...as my mother play an important role because she helps me to continue my work especially because I have kids and she manages to take care of them during my working hours”. (ID 2)

“I had a very smooth career in the sense that I got married at the end of my house job. Immediately after that my husband and parents both want me to continue my career in the medical field. So, I got support and facilitation from both sides”. (ID 20)

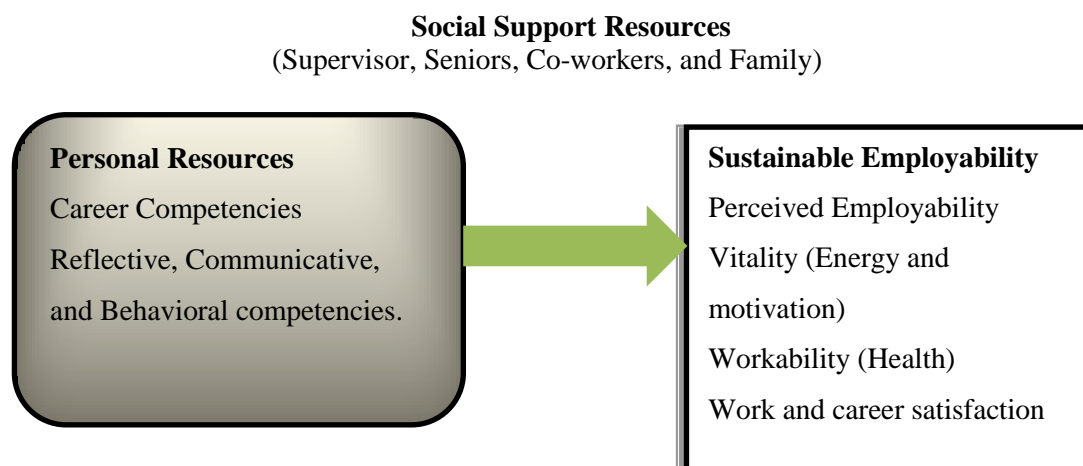


Figure 1: Conceptual Model of Sustainable Employability (SE)

Discussion

The purpose of this research is to expand the understanding of the SE concept as well as its resources for medical doctors. Thematic analysis revealed three main themes after having an in-depth analysis of interviews from doctors. These included the perceptions of SE which suggested that there are four major dimensions such as perceived employability, vitality and energy, workability (health), and work and career satisfaction. These dimensions emphasized the composition of the SE construct and few of them have been proposed in the literature as well before (Semeijn et al., 2015; Ybema et al., 2020). However, the satisfaction dimension was not reported yet which emerged as a sub-theme in this study. Previously, Fleuren et al. (2018) suggested nine dimensions of SE which included the dimension of job satisfaction of employees but not specifically focused on overall satisfaction related to individuals' work and career.

The two other major themes were categorized as the resources for the SE development are personal and social support resources. The theoretical framework of this study included the COR theory (Hobfoll, 1989) which highlights and proposed the resources for individuals to boost their well-being and to gain resources for future use. The findings are in line with this framework. COR theory also suggested two major resources for individuals such as their personal and social resources (Hobfoll, 2002). Individual personal resources are defined in literature as capabilities and qualities to

cope with challenging situations (Hobfoll et al., 2003). Theme two of the study described the personal factors of career competencies of employees. Career-related competencies are necessary specifically for doctors working in the private hospitals of Pakistan because of the inherent job insecurity in the sector to utilize these competencies for their SE (Zafar et al., 2017). It was further noticed during interviews that doctors of private hospitals strive to gain SE in their career by utilizing their resources, collectively their career competencies such as updating their skills and knowledge to continue working. Thus, they make themselves attractive for employers by attending workshops and holding valuable training certificates. They also focus on their communicative competency to form a network of people who can promote them. Through this, they also explore vast career opportunities by not binding themselves to continue the job in one certain hospital rather prefer to have a diversified career profile.

On contrary, social support resources emerged as the third important theme. Support from work context as well as from family plays a vital role in enhancing individuals' SE. Specifically, co-workers/colleagues, seniors, and supervisor, workers' support aid in enhancing one's employability, motivation, and energy, ability to work, and to be more satisfied at work (Van der Klink et al., 2016). It acts as a job resource and also guides individuals' behavior (Paustian-Underdahl & Halbesleben, 2014). It was observed during the study that those doctors are more successful in shaping their SE who got support and right direction from their immediate work and family environments like from their friends, parents or spouse, co-workers, and superiors.

Theoretical and Practical Implications

Taken together, the main strength of this study is the qualitative exploration of the SE phenomenon and its resources as there are scant such studies. SE is an emerging area and still is in its initial development of conceptualization (De Lange et al., 2020). Further, no study till now has highlighted the importance of both personal and contextual resources for SE. This study will surely help clarify the concept and importance of SE. The present study not only guides for young doctors to achieve SE but also enhances the understanding of the management of hospitals to realize the importance of SE. In this way, this study encouraged both organizations and individuals to capitalize upon the benefits of sustained employability and thus, contribute towards effective work performance and well-being. The in-depth exploration of the SE phenomenon and its resources is quite useful for others at their early career stages.

Limitations of the Study

The current study is not free from limitations which should be considered as an opportunity for future research avenues. Such as SE can be explored from a gender perspective because it may be different for males and females like it is difficult for females to continue their career with household responsibilities. In this case, family support matters. Male participants, on the other hand, were more interested to develop their SE for the future and their major focus was money generation to support their families financially. So, SE should be explored from a gender perspective as well as culturally also because SE can differ from region to region. For example, in Pakistan SE is more about financial gain as this is a developing economy and resources, and employment opportunities are limited. So, this is the reason, people want to remain employed and to progress in their expertise.

Conclusion

The present paper aims to shed light on the emerging area of SE. Drawing on the COR theory, this study tries to explore the concept of SE and the factors responsible for its enhancement. Using thematic analysis, interviews from the doctors revealed important findings suggesting that individuals SE is composed of four important dimensions such as the perceptions of employability, vitality and energy, workability of employees, and their work and career satisfaction. The emergent themes from data also focus on the individual's personal and social resources such as their competencies related to career and support from their work context as well as from their family.

Recommendations

This study provides insights to the management of private hospitals to invest in the doctors' SE and thus retain competent doctors. They may provide adequate guidance to employees to develop their career-related skills, knowledge, and abilities (Le Blanc et al., 2017). Organizations can monitor and evaluate the competencies of medical specialists, which may help to plan their future career and employment strategies. In this way, the present study energizes and encourages both organizations and individuals to capitalize on the benefits of SE.

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