
Perceived Employability as a Catalyst for Affective Commitment of Knowledge Workers

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Abstract

The study aims to examine the role of perceived employability in enhancing the affective commitment of knowledge workers. Authors collected cross-sectional data from 259 knowledge workers of India using snowball sampling and explained the proposed model based on social exchange theory. Further, data was analyzed using the PLS-SEM approach and bootstrapping procedures. The findings of the study confirm the positive association between perceived employability and affective commitment of knowledge workers. Thus, our study contradicts the “management paradox” and illuminates the bright side of perceived employability. The study will help organizations to understand the importance of perceived employability as a talent retention tool.

Keywords: *Affective Commitment, Employability, Knowledge Workers, Perceived Employability, PLS-SEM.*

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Introduction

The modern workplace is characterized by rapid environmental transformation, digitalization, and flexible occupations. In light of these changes, organizations revise their strategies by relying more on their employees' intellectual capital than traditional sources (Diaa et al., 2024). Therefore, organizations look for more competent, flexible, and adaptable employees who can proactively manage their employability, defined as one's chances of obtaining employment (Forrier & Sels, 2003; Fugate et al., 2021). It is sought as an alternative to employment security because of the shift in the landscape from lifelong employment to lifelong employability (Fugate et al., 2021; Lo Presti et al., 2025).

A more suitable stream of employability research that fits with the ideas of "modern" careers is perceived employability (PE) or self-perceived employability (De Vos et al., 2021). PE is a micro-level psychological approach that centers on an individual's perception of securing and sustaining employment. It's been more than a decade since Berntson et al. (2006) defined PE "as the individual's perception of his or her possibility to achieve a new job" (p. 225). Since then, numerous definitions and motivators of concepts have emerged, yet they have been criticized for being conceptually atheoretical and empirically fuzzy (De Vos et al., 2021; van Harten et al., 2022). Our reason for focusing on PE stems from the belief stated by Katz and Kahn (1978) that individual actions are guided more by their perceived reality than their objective truths. This belief is the sole reason why two people with the same set of competencies behave differently. A favorable self-view is advantageous in signaling one's own potential to the labor market (van Harten et al., 2022).

The loophole in previous literature is that most employability research is either focused on underprivileged groups such as the elderly, disabled, and unemployed migrants, or worried about the employability of graduates who are in the school-to-work transition phase (Berntson et al., 2006; Fugate et al., 2021; van Harten et al., 2022). However, employability is not just an asset for the unemployed and students but is equally required by the employed throughout their careers (De Cuyper et al., 2012). To illustrate, van Harten et al. (2022) highlighted the need for studying perceived employability from employed workers' perspectives. His idea is that once employed, there are different sets of signals that will become more important than in the school-to-work transition phase. Considering the employed, subjective employability rather than objective measures is of greater importance to embrace the ability to get a new job, especially when organizations are going through changes (Berntson et al., 2006). Therefore, we have shifted our focus from underprivileged groups to knowledge workers and answered the call made by Gorbatov et al. (2024) and van Harten et al. (2022).

Another rising concern in times of quiet quitting is associated with retaining the best talent by increasing their affective commitment with the organization. Affective commitment is defined in terms of emotional connection and identification of the employee with the organization (Meyer & Allen, 1991). As emphasized by Delali et al. (2024), affective

commitment is different from other forms of commitment (continuance and normative commitment), garnering greater research attention. But the relationship between perceived employability and affective commitment is going through a dilemma often called the “war of talents” or “catch-22 situation” (Akkermans et al., 2019).

Therefore, we aim to explore the effect of perceived employability on affective commitment of knowledge workers. Notably, literature suggests that PE leads to various desirable outcomes such as greater job satisfaction, performance, career success, and enhanced well-being for the individuals (Berntson et al., 2006; De Cuyper & De Witte, 2011; Lo Presti et al., 2025). Yet, organizations are constantly in a dilemma when it comes to the endorsement of PE for their workers. This dilemma is often referred to as the “management paradox,” which describes the idea that enhancing PE of its employees can result in turnover intention as and when employees find better opportunities elsewhere (De Cuyper and De Witte, 2011; De Cuyper et al., 2012). However, this implies that investing in workers’ PE may result in talent loss, while withholding such investment risks diminishing competitiveness by retaining a less skilled and adaptable workforce. Despite this tension, contemporary studies continue to focus on the beneficial effects of perceived employability. For instance, Lo Presti et al. (2025) suggest that human resource practitioners should stimulate PE of their employees in order to enhance organizational competitive advantage. Therefore, in line with contemporary authors, we propose that PE can lead to increased affective commitment among knowledge workers.

Perceived Employability

As discussed earlier, self-perceived employability is important because how a person behaves based on their perception, as perception directs action (Katz & Kahn, 1978). Berntson et al. (2006) introduced the concept of perceived employability as employee’s subjective evaluation of the possibilities of getting a new job. His definition is criticized for solely focusing on getting a new job and ignoring other factors such as labor market conditions. Also, this definition was unable to differentiate between internal and external labor market conditions. It was Rothwell and Arnold (2007) who made this distinction clear while defining self-perceived employability as “the individual’s ability to keep the job one has or to get the job one desires” (p. 25). At the initial level, most self-perceived employability literature follows this definition (De Cuyper & De Witte, 2011). De Cuyper and De Witte (2011) proposed a more complete view of perceived employability across two dimensions.

First is the contextual effect of the internal or external labor market on employability. Second is a person’s ability to continue existing employment or get a desired job. Additionally, self-perceived employability is conditional upon these two dimensions, and one dimension may predict the other. Thereafter, Vanhercke et al. (2014) adapted the definition of Berntson et al. (2006) and defined perceived employability as “the individual’s perception of his or her possibilities of obtaining and maintaining employment” (p. 594). These definitions of perceived employability bring to light some important facts about the concept and why it is

important to study. To begin, perceived employability highlights a psychological notion towards employability, emphasizing the role of perception in determining an individual's action. Additionally, it is important to keep in mind that perceived employability is shaped not just by individual characteristics (such as education; Berntson et al., 2006) but also by factors tied to the contextual environment (e.g., an employer's investment) (Vanhercke et al., 2014). Further, the idea of perceived employability highlights its importance for all groups of people, be they graduates, unemployed, or employed. To add, perceived employability endorses employment possibilities in the internal as well as external labor market, along with taking the quality and quantity of the job into consideration, which makes it unique from other related constructs (Vanhercke et al., 2014).

Affective Commitment

Affective commitment is one of the aspects of the three-component model defined by Meyer and Allen (1991). From a behavioral perspective, this phenomenon is defined as "the employee's emotional attachment to, identification with, and involvement in the organization" (Meyer & Allen, 1991; p. 67). Against this backdrop, Mowday et al. (1979) focused on the attitudinal aspect of commitment, describing it as an individual's mindset about the degree to which an individual's own values and goals are in congruence with an organization's mission, values, or goals.

Affective commitment is crucial for the organizations, as it is the force that binds employees to the organization. It is a socioeconomic feature that reflects employees' own desire to remain in the organization. It reflects that employees are with this particular organization because of their emotional binding with the organization and not out of some obligation. This emotional attachment to the organization, along with support gained from coworkers and supervisors, is beneficial in improving organizational performance (Pazetto et al., 2024). Therefore, it seems crucial to explore the factors that can lead to enhanced affective commitment of the knowledge workers. Literature suggests that affective commitment can be augmented by various personal and contextual factors such as knowledge sharing (Naim & Lenka, 2017), empowering leadership (Pazetto et al., 2024), co-worker support, and job satisfaction (Delali et al., 2024). However, its linkage with perceived employability is largely a matter of debate, often referred to as the "management paradox." Therefore, authors aim to contribute towards this largely debated paradox through this study.

Perceived Employability and Affective Commitment

The question of whether or not there is any logic behind an employer supporting the employability of its workers is hotly debated in early literature (Baruch, 2001; Philippaers et al., 2017). This dilemma is commonly referred to as the "management paradox" (De Cuyper & De Witte, 2011). It describes the idea that more employable workers will leave the organization at the first better alternative they get. Therefore, investment in the PE of workers is likely to give a competitive advantage to our competitors (Lo Presti et al., 2025). However,

in line with the recent literature, we argue that investment in PE can lead to various beneficial behaviors from the employees, such as affective commitment.

We propose our arguments based on the social exchange theory. Social exchange theory is based upon the norm of reciprocity, stating that the action of one party (the employee) is contingent upon the actions of another party (the employer). It states that any investment on the part of the employer will result in a feeling of gratitude and responsibility in the employees, and therefore, employees are more likely to respond in a positive way (Cropanzano et al., 2017; Lawler, 2001; Mitchell et al., 2012). Therefore, our perspective is that when employers invest organizational resources in sustaining and building PE, employees feel a sense of obligation towards the organization. They feel a perceived necessity and moral urge to reciprocate the efforts towards the organization in the form of various positive outcomes such as increased affective commitment. Similarly, Philippaers et al. (2019), using an interdependent, forward-looking approach, found a positive relationship between perceived external employability and the affective commitment of employees. Because employees perceiving greater external employability take it as a sign of successful investment on the part of their current employer and, therefore, may develop a greater sense of loyalty (Cropanzano et al., 2017; Mitchell et al., 2012).

Similarly, Akkermans et al. (2019) call investment in employability a “mutual win” for employer and employee. Where employees get a chance to update their knowledge, competencies, and skills, employers are creating a more committed and updated workforce. This win binds both parties and creates a need to reciprocate for employees as they want to secure further investment from their employer (Camps & Rodríguez, 2011). Additionally, even in the boundaryless career era, internal self-rated employability builds a sense of job security and facilitates job enrichment by providing career prospects that match their preferences. Accordingly, Akkermans et al. (2019) found that investment from employers in the form of HR practices promotes the internal and external perceived employability of employees, which in turn promotes workplace commitment.

Further literature suggests that the internal labor market already has an added advantage in attracting workers. Particularly because employers have already been successful in attracting them to a job that matches their preferences. Therefore, an employer’s investment in training and other development programs acts as a signal that the employer is interested in maintaining a long-term relationship with its employees. This creates a sense of obligation among employees to return the favor in the form of greater commitment and performance (Akkermans et al., 2019; De Cuyper & De Witte, 2011).

Thus, based on the above argument, we propose that:

Ha: Perceived employability is positively related to affective commitment of knowledge workers.

Research Methodology

Sample and Procedure

This study is based on cross-sectional survey data collected from knowledge workers in India. The data was collected from June 2025 to October 2025 from knowledge-intensive organizations (such as telecommunication, finance, and auditing). The term “knowledge worker” was first introduced by Peter Drucker in 1960 to highlight their importance in the knowledge economy. Gorbatov et al. (2024) described a knowledge worker as someone who “uses their cognitive and creative abilities to solve complex problems and make strategic decisions” (p. 40). We followed the snowball sampling method, as it increases the chances of obtaining data by tapping their referral networks. Data collection began by asking for consent from HR managers of the above-mentioned organizations. Then 342 questionnaires were floated to those who agreed to be a part of this research. After various visits and reminders, authors were able to receive 277 filled questionnaires. Out of these, some were found to be incomplete and redundant. Therefore, these responses (18) were removed from data analysis, resulting in 259 usable samples. 61.4% of our sample were male respondents, mostly falling within the age group of less than 25 years (39.8%) with less than 5 years of work experience (68.7%).

Measures

We used well established scales to confirm the content and face validity of the measurements. Responses were collected on a five-point Likert scale ranging from “Strongly Disagree” to “Strongly Agree” where one stands for strongly disagree and five stands for strongly agree. Perceived employability was measured through the 11-item scale adapted from Rothwell and Arnold (2007). Affective commitment was measured through the six-item scale adapted from Ahmad et al. (2018). Further, we controlled the effect of age and gender, and results suggest no significant impact of these variables.

Common Method Bias

As the data was self-reported and cross-sectional, there was a high risk of common method bias. Therefore, to mitigate this risk, we followed both procedural and statistical methods (Podsakoff et al., 2003). Procedural precautions include randomization of questions and clear and easy language. It creates psychological separation among the constructs under study (Podsakoff et al., 2012). In the statistical measures, variation inflation factor (VIF) values were reportedly below the inner limit of 3.33 (Kock, 2015), indicating no common method biasness in our study (see Table 1).

Analytical Strategy

Authors used Partial Least Square Structural Equation Modelling (PLS-SEM) with smart PLS version 4.1.1.6 (Ringle et al., 2024). It is a suitable technique for non-normal data and for handling second-order constructs.

Results

Measurement Model Assessment

Using PLS-SEM, the authors checked the reliability and convergent validity of the constructs as shown in Table 1. Following Hair et al. (2019, 2022) criterion, first we assessed a lower-order construct. Thereafter, using the latent score of the first-order construct, we checked for the higher-order construct i.e., PE. The values of Cronbach's alpha and rho_a were assessed to verify the internal reliability, which were mostly above the threshold of 0.70 (Hair et al., 2017). Despite some item loadings below 0.70 but above 0.60, they were kept for content validation because their average variance extracted (AVE) was reportedly more than 0.50 (Hair et al., 2017). With the AVE values above 0.50, convergent validity of the constructs was also established. To verify the discriminant validity of the constructs, HTMT ratios were assessed. As shown in Table 2, these ratio values were within the acceptable limit of 0.85 (Henseler et al., 2015).

Table 1: Reliability and Validity Analysis (N= 259)

| | Outer loading | VIF outer | Cronbach's alpha | rho_a | rho_c | AVE |
|-------------|---------------|-----------|------------------|-------|-------|-------|
| PE | | | 0.805 | 0.806 | 0.911 | 0.837 |
| PIE | 0.912 | 1.831 | 0.742 | 0.758 | 0.839 | 0.567 |
| PIE1 | 0.834 | 1.992 | | | | |
| PIE2 | 0.646 | 1.386 | | | | |
| PIE3 | 0.721 | 1.437 | | | | |
| PIE4 | 0.798 | 1.772 | | | | |
| PEE | 0.917 | 1.831 | 0.837 | 0.838 | 0.877 | 0.506 |
| PEE5 | 0.712 | 1.667 | | | | |
| PEE6 | 0.714 | 1.636 | | | | |
| PEE7 | 0.659 | 1.474 | | | | |
| PEE8 | 0.707 | 1.829 | | | | |

| | | | | | |
|--------------|-------|-------|-------|-------|------|
| PEE9 | 0.715 | 1.706 | | | |
| PEE10 | 0.76 | 1.789 | | | |
| PEE11 | 0.708 | 1.651 | | | |
| AC | | | 0.836 | 0.839 | 0.88 |
| AC1 | 0.756 | 1.805 | | | |
| AC2 | 0.724 | 1.52 | | | |
| AC3 | 0.675 | 1.522 | | | |
| AC4 | 0.735 | 1.65 | | | |
| AC5 | 0.782 | 1.837 | | | |
| AC6 | 0.774 | 1.833 | | | |

Note: AC= Affective Commitment, PIE= Perceived Internal Employability, PEE = Perceived External Employability, PE= Perceived Employability, VIF= Variance Inflation Factor, AVE = Average Variance Extracted

Table 2: Discriminant Validity (HTMT Ratio) (N= 259)

| | AC | PEE | PIE |
|------------|--------------|--------------|-----|
| AC | - | | |
| PEE | 0.686 | | |
| PIE | 0.709 | 0.845 | |
| | AC | PE | |
| AC | - | | |
| PE | 0.694 | | |

Note: AC= Affective Commitment, PIE= Perceived Internal Employability, PEE = Perceived External Employability, PE= Perceived Employability

Source: Author's own work

Structural Model and Hypothesis Testing

Firstly, we assessed the VIF values of the structural model to check for any multicollinearity issues. However, all the values being less than the threshold of 3.33 indicates no such problem in our study (Diamantopoulous, 2008). Next, authors checked the standardized root mean square residual (SRMR) values to see if the estimated model aligns with the observed data or not (Hair et al., 2017; 2019). Results indicate a good model fit, as both the saturated model and estimated model values were below the conservative limit of 0.08 (Hair et al., 2017).

Thereafter, we run a bootstrapping procedure at 10,000 sub-samples to assess the statistical significance of our hypothesis. Findings show that our proposed path was significant at $p < 0.001$, with path coefficient $\beta = 0.627$. Thus, Ha was supported. It implies that perceived employability is positively correlated with affective commitment of knowledge workers. Additionally, the predictive relevance of the proposed model was assessed with fits like R^2 , F^2 , and Q^2 (see Table 3).

Table 3: Hypothesis Testing (N= 259)

| | β -value | Confidence-Inte rvals | p-value | Decision | VIF Inner | F² |
|------------------------|-----------------|----------------------------------|----------------|----------------------------|----------------------------|----------------------|
| PE -> AC | 0.627 | (0.495, 0.726) | 0.000 | Supported | 1.002 | 0.002 |
| Age -> AC | 0.088 | (-0.003, 0.176) | 0.054 | Insignifican t | | |
| Gender -> AC | -0.124 | (-0.333, 0.087) | 0.244 | Insignifican t | | |
| R² | | | | | | Q² |
| AC | | 0.39 | 0.373 | | | |
| | | | | Saturated Model | Estimated Model | |

| | | |
|------|-------|-------|
| SRMR | 0.043 | 0.046 |
|------|-------|-------|

Note: PE= Perceived Employability, AC= Affective Commitment

Source: Author's own work

Discussion and Implications

Given the contemporary turbulent times, the employability of knowledge workers has become a hot topic for organizations and policymakers (Akkerman & Kubasch, 2017; De Vos et al., 2021). First, Coetze and Engelbrecht (2020) and later Gorbatov et al. (2024) appealed to future researchers to focus on the perceived employability of knowledge workers. In an environment where workers are themselves responsible for their perceived employability, they can only survive by maintaining their shine in the internal and external labor markets (Coetze & Engelbrecht, 2020). Further, knowledge workers are considered a significant workforce in the era of the knowledge economy. Thus, retaining these employees should be the key focus of any organization.

And therefore, we aim to explore the linkage between perceived employability and affective commitment of knowledge workers. In line with the literature, we found that perceived employability is positively associated with the affective commitment of knowledge workers. Employees who perceive themselves as more employable are known to be more productive, committed, and satisfied with their careers (Lo Presti et al., 2025; Philippaers et al., 2017). It suggests that an employer's investment in PE of their knowledge workers is a significant investment. Employees of such organizations perceive these investments as opportunities to grow and develop their capabilities. Further, they reciprocate the employer's efforts in the form of increased behavioral and emotional responses, such as affective commitment.

Additionally, HR managers and practitioners can benefit by carefully assessing their knowledge worker's perceived employability. HR practices such as training, upskilling programs, opportunities for personal growth, and discussions about career development goals may help strengthen the employability perception of knowledge workers. However, it might entail a shift in focus for strategic human resource management practitioners from traditional training to providing support for their employees in developing skills necessary for their PE. This new vision will help retain knowledge workers by fostering their emotional attachment

to the organization. This novel perspective makes PE a joint responsibility of employees as well as the organizations.

Limitations and Future Research Directions

Despite the contribution of the study, it is not free from limitations. First, the use of self-reported cross-sectional data may cause the response bias. It limits the generalizability of the study. Therefore, we suggest future researchers undertake longitudinal or multi-wave study designs. Further, our research is based on knowledge workers, and more research can be conducted across distinct cultures. Additionally, future studies can explore the distinct impact of perceived internal employability and perceived external employability on the affective commitment of knowledge workers.

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