



Sustainable Employability and Continuous Career Development: Experiencing the Value of Core Qualities

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Abstract

Sustainable employability of workers is an important issue for today's human resource management, career management and labour market policies. From research it is known that sustainable employability is affected by different factors such as leadership, career insecurity and the personal characteristics of people. The development and stimulation of sustainable employability and continuous career development can be supported by insights in and the awareness of the personality of individuals. Core Qualities can be considered as individual characteristics linked to personality. After an introduction in the latest insights from research in sustainable employability, this paper presents the Core Qualities concept and framework as a method for practice. The application of the Core Qualities and its related concepts of Pitfalls, Challenges and Allergies is illustrated by some exercises for career counselling and guidance practice. In addition, I will evaluate the practical value of the Core Quality method based on experiences, and feedback that we received from clients as well as colleagues.

Keywords: Sustainable employability, core qualities, career development, career guidance

Introduction

We live in a world in which new technologies, increased competition and a greater need for flexibility are central (Hellgren & Sverke, 2003). Organisations respond to these rapid changes through measures such as outsourcing, downsizing, mergers and by focusing on flexibilization of their work force (Bogaerts, De Witte, Verlinden, & Vermeulen, 2017; Hellgren & Sverke, 2003). Employees also have to adapt to this changing work environment confronted with continuously increased and altered work requirements (Brouwers, Engels, Heerkens, & van der Beek, 2015; Semeijn, Van Dam, van Vuuren, & Van der Heijden, 2015). This makes it important for employees to stay employable also on the longer term or in other words to develop sustainable

employability (Brouwers, Engels, Heerkens, & van der Beek, 2015).

Sustainable employability refers to "...working in such a way that they are able to meet their own needs and labor market requirements in the present, without compromising their ability to meet these in the future" (LeBlanc, Van der Heijden & Van Vuuren, 2017, p. 2).

Employability is influenced by individual factors and by external, contextual factors such as the economy (van Vuuren, 2011). Reduced employability leads to fewer opportunities on the labour market, which increases the dependency on the current employer. The result is that people participate even less in activities that strengthen employability and thus a vicious circle can arise (van Vuuren,

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2011). This shows that employability is a necessary condition for making progress in a career (van der Heijden, 2012), but also that the employee himself must actively invest in himself (van der Heijden, 2012). Employees must continue to develop themselves and ensure that their competencies remain in line with the expectations of organisations (Kang, Gold & Kim, 2012; King, 2000; Richter et al., 2013). An employee can be flexible and try to adapt by paying attention to his sustainable employability (van der Heijden, 2012). This effort is the responsibility of both the employee and the organisation (Verbruggen et al., 2008). The responsibility of organisations can be shaped by offering opportunities and instruments to increase employability and to encourage employees to take their own initiative (Verbruggen et al., 2008), for example by offering HRM practices such as training (Van Dam et al., 2006). In addition, it appears that employees who receive support from their organisation to increase their own employability, feel more involved in the organisation (Verbruggen et al. 2008).

Employee career behaviour is strongly influenced by the leadership qualities and social support an employee receives. The direct supervisor plays an important role in monitoring the employability of his employees (van der Heijden, 2012). Also career and work insecurity can have a significant negative impact on sustainable employability and not at the least: the personal characteristics of people. To enhance this attention for humans at work, an important role for life-long development and guidance seems warranted (Semeijn, 2018). What can career guidance contribute for this purpose? In particular, guidance can be aimed at helping the person be aware of and learn how to handle one's so-called Core Qualities (Ofman, 1995).

The Core Qualities Concept

Core Qualities can be considered as personality characteristics or strengths that (give) colour (to) the behaviour and achievements of a person. Individuals are

often recognized and valued by their (3-5) Core Qualities as parts of or the essence of their personality. Examples of Core Qualities are: Flexibility, Endurance, Creativity and Courage. Core qualities can be discriminated from skills and competences. Skills can be trained and learned, while core qualities can be developed as inner strengths that are already present in a person. Competences are broader concepts including skills, values and drives (Meyers, 2002).

Daniel Ofman, a Dutch business consultant, introduced the concept of Core Qualities in the nineties of the past century (Ofman, 1995). Other authors, such as Seligman (2002), also described and applied the concept of Core Qualities, for example in his happiness experiments (Seligman, 2002). Ofman vested and coined the term in the Netherlands and made it quite popular in career counseling and coaching practice. He believed that employees and leaders could benefit from awareness of and insights in their personal core qualities. He also claimed that besides individuals, teams and organizations have their typical Core Qualities: the Creative team, the Flexible organisation.

While working with Core Qualities, three strongly related concepts are relevant as well:

- *Pitfalls* refer to the deformation of a core quality, hampering a person (team, organization) to be effective and successful. For instance: Flexibility becomes Inconsistency.
- *Challenges* are qualities that should be developed to counter a specific Pitfall. An example: Orderly counters Inconsistency.
- *Allergies* appear when an individual is confronted with behaviour or an attitude of others that is a too strong or heavy form of his/her own Challenge. The allergic reaction results in irritation and avoiding the other, preventing fruitful cooperation. When Orderly is a

Challenge, the corresponding Allergy can be met in Rigidity.

The four described concepts: Core Quality, Pitfall, Challenge and Allergy are

interconnected in a dynamic way and can be visualized in a so called Core Quadrant. Figure 1 shows a Quadrant that is built up from the Core Quality: *Helpful*

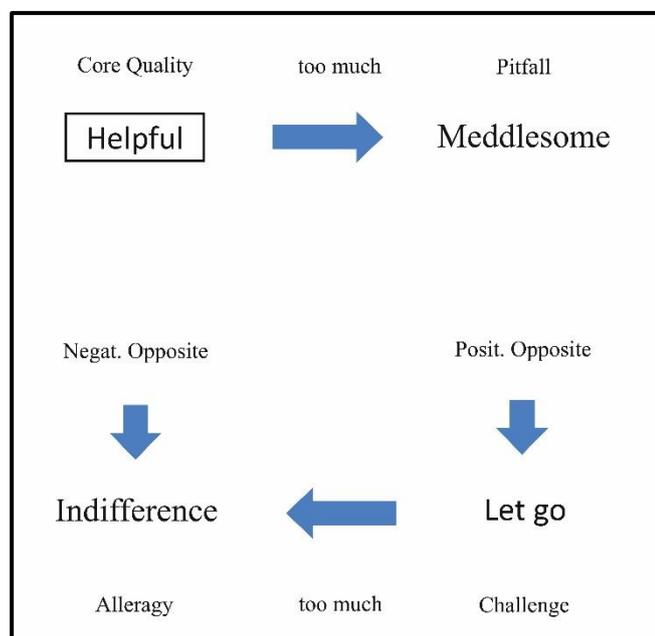


Figure 1: Core Quadrant - Helpful

Figure 1 shows just an example. It is absolutely not certain that all individuals with Helpful as core quality will all have exactly the same Pitfall or Allergy. Every individual has to investigate and fill in his or her particular and personal characteristics. A Helpful individual may recognise Meddlesome as a personal Pitfall, but another one may identify it as Overtaking.

Value of the Method

Several studies of Seligman underpin the value of awareness of core qualities for the development of well-being happiness and personal growth of adults. A study evaluating the development of Core Quality in young students of elementary schools concluded that they are capable of recognizing their own Core Qualities and linking them with their actions (Ruit & Korthagen, 2013). Studies on the value of using the Quality concepts and the Core Quadrant for the development of sustainable employability and further career development are not available yet.

However, the Core Quality concept, also described by Seligman (2002), seems to be very useful and fruitful for practitioners. A lot of our Dutch colleagues, career counsellors and consultants, are currently applying the Quality concepts and Quadrant as a tool.

Tools, Exercises and Assignments

All kinds of other tools for practice based on Core Qualities, such as card games (KernKonsult, 1995), are developed and applied as well (Ofman, 1995, Gerrickens, 2000). Several individual and group exercises have been developed in practice that will provide a clear insight into the client's Core Qualities and are helpful to construct personal Core Quadrants. One that is often applied in individual sessions starts with the following instruction: "Think of personal achievements in your (work) lives and identify three to five personal core qualities that played a crucial role in these successes." The counsellor invites the client to explain why and how these qualities played a role. In a group session

the clients may share this together, commenting and helping each other. Identifying and presenting personal qualities is not always easy for clients. They may be shy or insecure by nature or raised and educated with values and norms that don't favour talking about achievements, success and personal qualities. Counsellors and also group peers can stimulate and be supportive to speak up.

After some rounds and trials we often notice that clients gain pride. For others it may be a discovery to have and be allowed to have personal qualities. To start with, reminding people of their achievements and success is of course not always an easy way to investigate. Sometimes people forget particular ones and that's why it is important to take enough time. Of course you can also ask your client to take away the assignment for a more (time) intensive approach at home. And/or to ask family members or friends for help in retrieving their memories.

A next step in working with the Core Qualities follows after explaining the Core Quadrant framework. It seems to be instructive when you build up a Quadrant step by step drawing it on a flip over or screen. The instruction may go as follows: "Core Qualities are related to other personal characteristics. As you show too much of your Core Quality it can be considered as the shadow side or a deformation of it. We call this element: Pitfall, because it makes you ineffective". You can ask your client(s) to connect one of their Core Qualities with their Pitfall on a work sheet.

"Another related concept is the positive opposite of your Pitfall indicated as Challenge. Developing your Challenge helps to overcome your Pitfall and is also complementary to your Core Quality". Invite your client(s) again to connect the Challenge in the Quadrant.

"A fourth element in the Quadrant is called the Allergy when you meet "too much" of your own Challenge in other people and get irritated or annoyed".

Meeting your Allergy often results in being trapped in your own Pitfall, although it also points to and reminds you of your Challenge as a learning point. This is an eye opener for some clients.

Constructing a Core Quadrant is a real challenge for clients. It needs some time and often several attempts to make a quadrant complete. It is a quest to find the right and correct fitting terms for an individual. The Quadrant also offers the opportunity to start at any of the four corners of the framework. This offers clients sometimes a more easy way of completing it. Or when it is difficult to find the right specific element to fill in. For example sometimes clients may not easily mention their Core Qualities. Some know and mention their shadows quicker. They can start with that and complete the Quadrant from that upper left corner going clockwise or just the other direction. Others may more easily find or be aware of their Allergies. We often know exactly what is irritating us in other people, don't we?

Colleagues in introduction workshops state in their feedback that it is this very struggle that makes the assignment valuable. "You have to go deeper into your inner personality, have to take a closer look. But this may also be a confrontation with yourself and that is not always easy too. This needs careful guidance and coaching".

A next step in the guidance or counselling process working with these concepts and framework is to connect the findings with personal (career) development. Some relevant questions to be considered are:

A general common question to start with could be: "What did you learn from the Core Quadrant exercises with respect to your personal development and career and work life?" In addition, the Challenges, Pitfall and Allergies may stimulate new developmental initiatives. Personal coaching or specific training aiming at the improvement or strengthening qualities and preventing ineffective personality features. Also career decisions and (re)directing a

career plan or strategy may be the result. Core Qualities awareness may serve as a compass, pointing at personal success factors. Career choices and dilemmas may be approached with personal strengths and or their complimentary Challenges.

Clients gave feedback that they feel more connected with their own personality or “self”, gaining or regaining self-confidence and a kind of grounding or hold for the longer term, referring to a more sustainable career orientation. Sustainable employability supported by the feeling and insight that there is always a kind of basic asset in yourself is fundamental for developing new necessary skills and competences to stay employable.

Summary and Conclusions

The development and stimulation of sustainable employability can be supported by insights into and the awareness of the personality of individuals. Working with personal characteristics, such as Core Qualities and its connected concepts such as Pitfalls, Challenges and Allergies, as well as the Core Quadrant as an overarching framework seems to have practical value for career counselling and guidance. However, more research is needed for scientific validation, especially when it comes to application of the Core Qualities for the development of sustainable employability, continuous labour participation and career development.

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Dr. Gert van Brussel is affiliated with the Open University of the Netherlands, where is presently external thesis supervisor. He has more than 40 years of experience in the domain of career development in all kinds of roles: counsellor, consultant, entrepreneur, researcher, lecturer and presenter. Gert is member of the Board of IAEVG since 2015 and President from September 2019 on. He is a past president and Honorable Member of NOLOC, the Dutch association of career professionals.

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