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Article

Employable until Retirement: How Inclusive Leadership and HR Practices Can Foster Sustainable Employability through Strengths Use

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Abstract: Background: Although the new model ³ of sustainable employability (SE), which builds on the capability approach, has received growing attention, research on how to enhance workers' SE is scarce. In this study, we aimed to investigate whether (1) inclusive leadership and high-involvement HR practices are positively associated with SE and whether (2) strengths use mediates these associations. To test our research hypotheses, we surveyed Dutch employees (N = 364), selected with random sampling. The results of structural equation modeling showed that inclusive leadership and high-involvement HR practices were positively associated with workers' SE. Moreover, we discovered that strengths use mediated these relationships. These results contribute to the SE literature by providing initial evidence that inclusive leadership and high-involvement HR practices are directly and indirectly (through strengths use) related to workers' SE.

Keywords: sustainable employability; capability set for works; inclusive leadership; high-involvement HR practices; strengths use

1. Introduction

The topic of sustainable employability (SE) has recently gained considerable attention in many Western countries due to the aging workforce and a lack of skilled young employees [1,2]. SE commonly refers to the extent to which an employee is capable of and motivated to work until retirement age [3]. A sustainable workforce is particularly critical from an organizational standpoint, because it can reduce the costs of turnover, absenteeism, and burnout [4]. Therefore, in order to safeguard workers' SE, organizations need to configure work in a sustainable manner so that workers can maintain their well-being and health [5]. Limited prior research indicated that organizations can stimulate workers' SE by implementing development-based human resource management (HRM) practices [6] and creating a supportive leadership culture at the workplace [7].

One of the comprehensive conceptualizations of SE, which builds on the capability approach (CA), was proposed by van der Klink and colleagues [5]. According to this new SE model, in order to have a high level of SE, workers should consider certain work values (e.g., contributing to something valuable) as important, have adequate work opportunities

to realize these values, and be personally able to realize them [5]. Prior research on this conceptualization of SE focused on outcomes and showed that higher SE was associated with enhanced work performance and work ability, and decreased absenteeism and depression [8,9]. Yet its potential antecedents have been largely overlooked. Although, in their seminal study, Van der Klink and colleagues [5] argued that SE can be achieved through organizational factors, up to now, there has been little or no research investigating the associations between organizational factors and workers' SE using the CA. In addition, in their validation study of the new measure of SE (the capability set for work questionnaire), Gürbüz et al. [10] evaluated the further validity of the new measure of SE (i.e., the capability set for work questionnaire) and called for future studies on how HR practices and leadership as organizational conversion factors impact employees' SE. Whereas previous operationalization of SE mostly relied on proximal indicators such as worker vitality and employability [11,12], the new measurement of SE may improve our understanding of the topic, since it combines the values and abilities of employees and the opportunities offered by the work context.

In the present study, drawing upon self-determination theory (SDT) [13], we argue that inclusive leadership and high-involvement HR practices as organizational conversion factors are related to workers' SE. We focus on these two factors because they signal to employees that they are empowered and included. SDT posits that when workers' fundamental needs (competence, autonomy, and relatedness) are fulfilled, they are more likely to be intrinsically motivated to achieve optimal performance and well-being [13]. As workplace practices such as inclusive leadership and high-involvement HR practices enable workers to be socially integrated, feel valued, and empowered to contribute to the organization (e.g., by participating in decision-making processes) [14,15], their needs for relatedness and autonomy will be satisfied. This fulfillment may create a suitable environment for workers to achieve important work goals in the form of capabilities, thus leading to higher SE.

Our other central assertion is that realizing capabilities according to the CA presupposes freedom and a suitable context, and it is therefore conceptually logical that inclusive leadership and high-involvement HR practices will create freedom and facilitate a proper organizational climate for realizing capabilities. Moreover, we propose that strengths use (i.e., using one's personal abilities for optimal achievement) [16] may mediate the relationships between inclusive leadership and high-involvement practices and SE, because recent empirical evidence shows that the use of strengths acts as a crucial mechanism in the relationship between job resources and work outcomes [17–19].

Consequently, the first purpose of this study is to investigate whether inclusive leadership and high-involvement HR practices are positively related to SE. The second objective is to uncover the process mechanism behind these associations by exploring the mediating role of strengths use.

The present study aims to make three unique contributions to the literature. First, we extend the literature on SE based on the CA approach by investigating its potential antecedents (i.e., inclusive leadership and high involvement HR practices) in response to the call by Gürbüz et al. [10] to investigate "the relationships between the organizational factors and SE" (p. 8). Previous studies either mostly focused on the outcomes of SE [8,9] or measured SE through proximal constructs [11,12]. Second, we add to the literature by examining the unexplored process mechanism, which may help us to understand why inclusive leadership and high-involvement HR practices lead to SE. Specifically, we propose that strengths use acts as a mediator in this relationship. This has particularly important practical implications, because most organizations base HR practices on the deficit paradigm, which focuses on employees' weaknesses [20] rather than their strengths, and this hinders practitioners from configuring inclusive, strengths-based HR practices. Lastly, we contribute to strengths use theory by investigating unexplored associations between inclusive leadership and high involvement HR practices and strengths use. This is

a meaningful contribution to the literature because research that links HR practices and leadership styles to worker strengths use is still scarce.

2. Theoretical Framework and Hypotheses

2.1. Sustainable Employability

Different conceptualizations of SE exist in the literature, since it is complicated and difficult to gauge [3,21,22]. Le Blanc et al. [3], using the Ability-Motivation-Opportunity (AMO) model, argued that SE refers to the extent to which a worker is capable of working, motivated to work, and has opportunities to work in the present and the future. Building on the work value perspective, Deng et al. [21] conceptualized SE in terms of people who prefer jobs with great intrinsic value and having the capacity to continue working throughout their lifetimes. Fleuren et al. [22] recently described SE as an “individual’s ability to function at work and in the labor market, or their ‘employability’, which is not negatively, and preferably positively, affected by that individual’s employment over time” (p. 15) and suggested nine indicators (e.g., work ability, fatigue, and job performance) to measure SE.

The most thorough and commonly quoted definition of SE, however, was proposed by Van der Klink et al. [5]. Building on Sen’s capability approach (CA) [23], they conceptualized SE as follows [5]: “Throughout their working lives, workers can realize tangible opportunities in the form of a set of capabilities. They also enjoy the necessary conditions that allow them to make a valuable contribution through their work, now and in the future, while safeguarding their health and welfare. This requires, on the one hand, a work context that facilitates them, and on the other hand the attitude and motivation to exploit these opportunities” (p. 74). This conceptualization emphasizes a set of capabilities that workers can develop if they are able and empowered to realize their work values as meaningful goals in today’s work context. According to this model of SE, for the present-day worker, the value of work is an important aspect of the quality of working life and well-being at work, and thus SE [5]. The CA is generally accepted as an approach to assess and influence well-being in a much more fundamental way than relating it “merely” to actual functioning or satisfaction. The most general description capability is “the freedom or opportunities people have to realize ‘beings or doings people have reason to value” [24] (p. 10). The idea is that if people could realize this in their work, if they have the “being”, i.e., can be in their work or have the identity that they aspire to, and also achieve the “doing”, i.e., do things that have value for themselves and their (work) environment, this is a very relevant aspect of SE.

To clarify the CA more clearly, the cycling metaphor has been used in the literature [24]. To be able to achieve cycling, a person needs four indispensable elements: a bike, the required physical capacity and skills, a suitable physical environment (e.g., a road), and a specific social environment (e.g., the absence of a curfew). If any of these elements is missing, the person cannot cycle. Applied to the work context, the CA argues that, for optimal functioning at work, workers should have personal resources (the required physical capacity and skills), an interesting job (a bike), and a relevant work context to achieve their work-related goals (a road and no curfew). Returning to the above definition, in this context the term “capability” refers to the real possibility of having cycling as a mobility option, while “functioning” refers to choosing to cycle instead of walking or driving a car or using public transport. In order for it to become a capability, it is important that the person positively values cycling. If they dislike cycling, it is not an important capability for them. The central contention of the CA is that for optimal functioning at work (e.g., well-being), attention should be given to what a person values, the opportunities that are essential for freedom of choice, and what a person can do [5]. More specifically, based on the CA, in order for workers to have a high level of SE, they should (a) consider certain work values as important, (b) have adequate work opportunities to achieve these values (enabled), and (c) be personally able to realize them (able) [5].

Building upon the CA, this new model of SE, illustrated in Figure 1, postulates a process that encompasses four important elements: work values (potentials to achieve), inputs (means to achieve), conversion factors, and outcomes [5]. The work values are at the core of the model and essential for individuals to maintain meaningful functioning at work. In another subsequent study, in employee interviews, a set of seven work values were extracted from practice to measure workers' SE: "the use of knowledge and skills, development of knowledge and skills, involvement in important decisions, building and maintaining meaningful contacts at work, setting your own goals, having a good income, and contributing to something valuable" [8] (p. 38). These seven values, the so-called capability set, are seen as important goals by the majority of working individuals who find them worth pursuing. Van der Klink et al. [5] argued that adding the value element leads to a sustainable form of employability. Research has confirmed that "capabilities" as identified with capability set for work (CSW) are better predictors of SE-related proxies than functioning/actual performance (e.g., work ability) used in most other conceptualizations of SE [8,9]. More recently, in their study, Gurbuz et al. [10] found that that CSW has convergent, predictive, and incremental validity.



Figure 1. Model of sustainable employability based on capability approach [5].

The left side of Figure 1 shows personal (e.g., individual abilities) and work (e.g., work demands, task structure) resources that are proposed as input variables exploited to achieve the work values that workers consider important for optimal functioning. The approach contends that the input variables can be determinants of SE when suitable personal and contextual factors exist [5]. The strengths of the CA are its normativity and contextuality. The normativity of the method implies that situations are not only analyzed but also assessed, and that the method is explicitly aimed at improving situations and contexts. The aspect of contextuality also relates to normativity in the sense that normativity manifests itself mainly in contextuality. The model gives the right/entitlement and moral claim to adjustments at the policy level that should enable people to realize goals and values that are important to them [5].

One point worth noting here is that in the CA, the term "resources" has a different meaning than it does in job demands-resources (JD-R) theory. In the CA, it refers to all inputs, including job demands, that will be converted into tangible opportunities to meet the valued work goals [5]. That is, a demand can also be viewed as a facilitating factor if it is in tune with an employee's work values. In JD-R theory, however, "resources" refers to various aspects of the job (e.g., autonomy, feedback) that lead to work engagement, while "job demands" (e.g., work pressure, workload) refers to important factors that cause job strain and burnout [25]. Moreover, the main point of the CA is that it distinguishes between

resources and conversion factors. The identification of these factors is a unique contribution of the CA compared to the JD-R model.

Returning to Figure 1, between work values and inputs, individual and organizational conversion factors (e.g., motivation to learn and HRM practices, respectively) are suggested as critical enablers. These allow workers to transform their personal and work resources into tangible opportunities by realizing the seven work values. If workers are able and have convenient opportunities at the workplace to fulfill the seven tangible work values, they will possess a larger capability set, reflecting higher SE. Finally, on the right side of the model, outcomes such as well-being, work performance, work ability, and work engagement are put forward as positive results of workers' SE [5]. Previous research on this SE model showed that higher SE was associated with greater task performance, work ability, and job satisfaction, and decreased absenteeism and depression [8–10].

It appears that importance, enablement, and ability constituents of the new model of SE, which identify the factors that convert value into capability, resemble the components of the AMO model. However, the (original) goal of the AMO model was focused on organizational performance through HR practices that stimulate ability, motivation, and opportunity [26], while the new model of SE based on CA is focused on flourishing and well-being of workers as a value in itself [5]. A more conceptual difference is that in the AMO model, motivation, being capable, and enablement are considered as resources or general determinants, while in the new model of the SE model they are considered as conversion factors for each specific work value separately, leading to a more person- and context-specific analysis of the HR situation and therefore more tailor-made interventions [5].

2.2. Inclusive Leadership and Sustainable Employability

Leadership refers to the capacity to influence and encourage followers [19]. Previous literature indicated that effective leadership styles are associated with enhanced individual and organizational performance [27]. One recent approach that has gained increased attention is inclusive leadership, defined as leadership behaviors that ensure that the voices and ideas of subordinates are genuinely heard and respected [14]. Inclusive leaders encourage their subordinates to make meaningful contributions to their work and the organization [28]. Subordinates of inclusive leaders believe that their leaders are aware of their needs, easily accessible, open to discussing innovative ways of realizing work-related goals, and willing to involve them in important decisions [29]. We postulate that inclusive leadership behaviors (e.g., being open and accessible, involving workers in decision-making, encouraging subordinates to speak up) may create a suitable environment for workers to convert the inputs (e.g., personal capacity, work demands) into a set of tangible opportunities (e.g., development of knowledge and skills) to fulfill valuable work functioning. That is, more inclusive leadership at the workplace will lead to higher SE of workers. This reasoning is also in line with one of the tenets of SDT, which contends that satisfying a basic need for relatedness, for instance, can trigger intrinsic motivation for workers to achieve optimal functioning at work. As working with inclusive leaders help workers feel respected, socially integrated, and valued [13], their need for relatedness can be met. This fulfillment can create an atmosphere where workers experience intrinsic motivation to realize the valued work goals, which leads to higher SE. Although this linkage has not yet been investigated, prior research found that inclusive leadership fosters psychological safety [e.g., feeling safe to speak up], which in turn promotes creativity at work [29,30]. Thus, we propose the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 1 (H1). *Inclusive leadership is positively associated with SE.*

2.3. High-Involvement HR Practices and Sustainable Employability

The second factor that might be an important predictor of SE is high-involvement HR practices, described as “a coherent set of HR practices that enhance employees' abilities, motivation, and opportunities to put forth discretionary effort” [15] (p. 189). High-involvement

HR practices are conceptualized based on the AMO model, which formulates employee performance as a composition of three important elements, ability, motivation, and opportunity [26]. According to the AMO model, workers' performance can be optimized by implementing HR practices that are designed to foster their abilities and motivation (i.e., ability- and motivation-enhancing practices), and that provide opportunities to use their skills by involving them in various activities (i.e., high-involvement practices) [15]. In this sense, the AMO framework [26] is also congruent with the basic arguments of SDT [13]. This is because ability-enhancing practices such as providing training may serve to satisfy the need for competence, while opportunity-enhancing or high-involvement practices such as inviting workers to participate in decision-making create a social context in which the need for relatedness and autonomy can be fulfilled. Taken together, HR practices designed to enhance workers' ability and opportunity may result in higher work performance as these practices provide a suitable environment that fosters workers' intrinsic motivation by satisfying their basic needs [30].

In this paper, we focus on high-involvement HR practices as these sorts of practices signal to employees that their work environment provides desirable opportunities to contribute to the organization [31]. Providing opportunities to be involved in decision-making, share information, and have flexible roles and job design are frequently cited in the literature as high-involvement HR practices [32]. These practices can build environmental cues for workers that allow and empower them to use their competencies to achieve work-related goals and contribute to decision-making [28]. We suggest that high-involvement HR practices can help workers feel involved, autonomous, and supported by their organization by particularly satisfying their psychological need for autonomy and relatedness [13]. As a result, workers will experience favorable opportunities to fulfill their work values, which will be reflected in higher SE. The associations between high-involvement HR practices and SE have not yet been explored; however, previous research demonstrated that such HR practices alleviate workers' self-initiated activities including knowledge use, and fulfill their growth potential [31]. Therefore, we put forward the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 2 (H2). *High-involvement HR practices are positively associated with SE.*

2.4. Strengths Use

Individual strengths, which are gaining popularity with the advent of positive psychology [33], are defined as "the characteristics of a person that allow them to perform well or at their personal best" [16] (p. 15). Although strengths can be viewed as trait-level skills and abilities [33], most researchers agree that they are malleable and contingent upon context and individual interests [34,35], which means that, when energized and enabled in the workplace, strengths are linked to employees' optimal functioning at work [36].

Although they are related, strengths use is empirically distinct from work engagement, which refers to the level of vigor, dedication, and absorption workers feel at work [37]. In line with this assertion, in their validation study, Van Woerkom et al. reported that strengths use was only moderately associated with dedication ($r = 0.49, p < 0.05$) and vigor ($r = 0.47, p < 0.05$) [36].

2.5. Inclusive Leadership, High-Involvement HR Practices, and Strengths Use

According to SDT, when employees' three core psychological needs (competence, autonomy, and relatedness) are satisfied, they are more likely to be intrinsically motivated to achieve work-related goals [13]. This implies that organizations and supervisors can help employees to identify and use their strengths at work by fostering competence, encouraging autonomy to use their strong points, and allowing them to be socially included. Indeed, several studies investigated the antecedents of organizational level strengths use. For example, in their study, Van Woerkom et al. found that strengths use can be stimulated by organizational strengths use support [17], while Bakker et al. reported that employees were more inclined to use their strengths when their supervisors exhibited transformational lead-

ership behaviors [19]. Similarly, Ding and Yu discovered that strengths-based leadership facilitated employees' the strengths use [38]. Based on SDT and previous studies, therefore, it is plausible to anticipate that when supervisors exhibit inclusive leadership behaviors (e.g., they allow employees to have the autonomy to improve their work processes or involve workers in decision-making), employees will feel supported and socially integrated, and will identify and use their strengths at work, thereby satisfying their psychological desire for autonomy and connectedness. Likewise, we argue that high-involvement HR practices provide employees with the opportunity and freedom to use their strengths at work, because such practices help them feel autonomous and supported by their organization. For example, a flexible job design may enable employees to use their strong points autonomously, while opportunities to be involved in decision-making [33] make them feel socially connected. While prior studies showed that organizational support for strengths use [17], strength-based leadership [38], and transformational leadership [19] stimulate strengths use at work, the associations between inclusive leadership, high-involvement HR practices, and strengths use have not yet been studied. Building on SDT, the following hypotheses were formulated:

Hypothesis 3 (H3). *Inclusive leadership is positively associated with strengths use.*

Hypothesis 4 (H4). *High-involvement HR practices are positively associated with strengths use.*

2.6. Strengths Use and Sustainable Employability

Strengths use may also positively influence employees' favorable work behaviors [20]. Employees who make use of their strengths are more inclined to flourish and achieve job-related goals [35]. Since the use of strengths fosters mastery experiences [39] and self-enhancement [17], while diminishing job demands [40], we suggest that strengths use helps employees to develop a larger capability set by enhancing their mastery experiences, vitality, and self-enhancement to achieve both the enablement and ability constituents of the seven work values. Previous studies found that strengths use enhances self-efficacy [41], work engagement [17], and perceived employability [18]. Therefore, we formulate the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 5 (H5). *Strengths use is positively associated with SE.*

2.7. Mediating Role of Strengths Use

Aside from the direct associations between conversion factors (inclusive leadership and high-involvement HR practices) and SE, we also anticipate indirect relationships through strengths use. When employees see inclusive leadership behaviors from their supervisors or perceive high-involvement HR practices at the workplace, they are more likely to experience autonomy and be encouraged to carry out their responsibilities in a way that best matches their strengths, and feel more supported and heard by their supervisor, which will help them in identifying and using their strengths [17]. In turn, more strengths use at work will help employees to develop higher SE (i.e., workers will have a larger capability set) by achieving both enablement and ability constituents of the seven work values. Therefore, we formulate the following two hypotheses:

Hypothesis 6 (H6). *Strengths use mediates the positive relationship between inclusive leadership and SE.*

Hypothesis 7 (H7). *Strengths use mediates the positive relationship between high-involvement HR practices and SE.*

Our hypothesized model is shown in Figure 2.

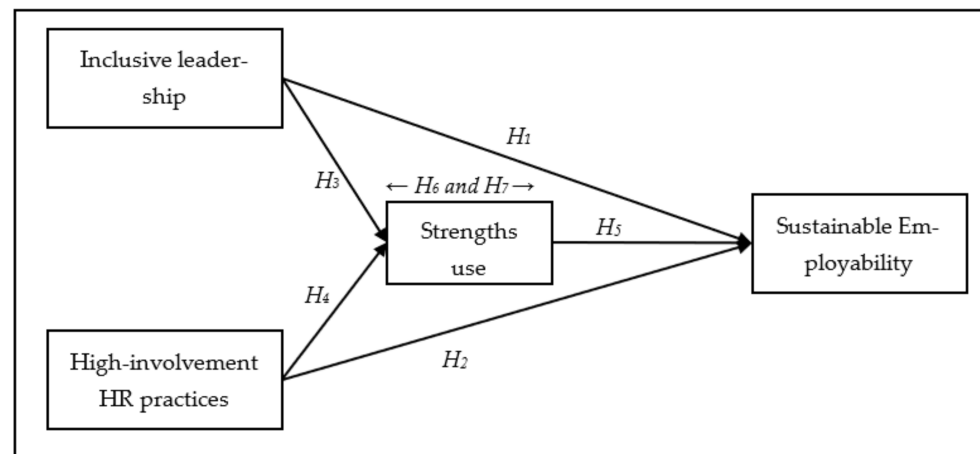


Figure 2. Hypothesized sustainable employability model.

3. Method

3.1. Study Design and Sample

A total of 363 Dutch working individuals participated in this study. Data were collected in September 2021 using the Longitudinal Internet Studies for the Social Sciences (LISS) panel controlled by CentERdata (Tilburg University) [42]. The LISS panel members are Dutch individuals selected from the population registry by random sampling. Every year, they fill out a follow-up survey covering a variety of themes including education, political viewpoints, and work preferences. Further information on the LISS panel and CentERdata is accessible at: www.lissdata.nl (accessed on 21 September 2022).

For the current study, an online questionnaire was given to 597 randomly selected members of the LISS panel who work at various organizations ($N = 597$). The research subjects were selected based on two criteria by CentERdata: they had a paid job and worked for a medium-sized or large organization with at least 50 employees. We included employees from medium and large organizations because small organizations usually do not have a formal and well-established HR system which is one of our study variables. After 2 weeks, a reminder was given to participants who had not responded to the survey. In all, 401 people completed the survey, with a response rate of 67%. After initial data screening, 37 questionnaires were excluded due to incomplete answers, thus 364 questionnaires were included. Our analysis demonstrated that there were no significant differences between responders and non-responders in terms of gender, education, and age. Out of 364 respondents, half were female, the average age was 45.65 years ($SD = 12.45$ years), the average organizational tenure was 12.34 years ($SD = 11.38$ years), and the average weekly work time was 31.25 h ($SD = 9.86$ h). In terms of educational level, the majority of participants (78.6%, $N = 286$) had an intermediate vocational degree or above. The majority of participants (59.3%, $N = 216$) were married and had a fixed-term contract (87.6%, $N = 319$).

3.2. Measures

Sustainable employability was rated via the capability set for work questionnaire (CSWQ), constructed by Abma et al. [8]. The CSWQ is an index that gauges whether 7 work values (e.g., “using knowledge and skills in your work”) are regarded as important by employees, are enabled in the work context, and can be fulfilled. For each of these values, the worker is asked: “How important is this work value for you?”, “Does your work provide the opportunities to achieve this work value?”, “To what extent do you actually achieve this work value?”. Answers are given on a scale from 1 = not at all to 5 = to a very large extent. Consistent with previous research [10], the average of the three questions for the seven work values was used to compute the overall capability set score. A high score indicates a high SE score. The CSWQ is given in Appendix A.

Inclusive leadership was rated using a 9-item scale [29] evaluated on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree). An example is: “My direct supervisor encouraged me to approach him/her with new problems.” Higher scores indicate that respondents experience highly inclusive leadership behaviors at work. Cronbach’s α was 0.94, revealing high internal consistency.

High-involvement HR practices were assessed with the 11-item of the high-involvement HR practices scale. For this scale, 10 items were adapted from Prieto and Pilar Pérez Santana’s study [15]. An example is “In my department, workers are included in the decision-making process”. We included an additional item on role flexibility based on Bae and Lawler [43] due to its relevance to high-involvement HR practices [31]. Responses were evaluated on a 5-point scale from 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree. Higher scores show that respondents perceive high-involvement HR practices at work. Cronbach’s α was 0.87, showing very good internal consistency [44].

Strengths use was measured via a 6-item scale (0 = almost never to 6 = almost always) devised by Van Woerkom et al. [36]. A sample item is: “I use my strengths in my work”. Cronbach’s α was 0.87, showing very good internal consistency [43].

Control variables: Age, gender, and average weekly working hours were used as controls, as in earlier studies [10].

3.3. Analytical Strategy

SPSS for Windows and AMOS 24 [45] were used to analyze the data. We tested the distinctiveness of inclusive leadership, high-involvement HR practices, and strengths use measures using confirmatory factor analyses (CFA) with maximum likelihood (ML) estimation [46]. The model fit was evaluated to determine the goodness of fit indices of the hypothesized three-factor model (the inclusive leadership, high-involvement HR practices, and strengths use) and other nested models by the use of χ^2/df (degree of freedom), root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA), comparative fit index (CFI), standardized root mean squared residual (SRMR), and χ^2 difference tests [47]. $\chi^2/df < 5$, RMSEA < 0.08 , CFI > 0.90 , and SRMR < 0.08 were considered acceptable fit values [46,48]. The SE measure was excluded from this validation check, as it was an index. The preliminary relationships among study variables were evaluated by performing Pearson’s correlations. To test our hypothesized model, structural equation modeling (SEM) with ML estimation was conducted. We used the average scores of the variables as manifest variables. Indirect effects were evaluated by using the bootstrap method with 5000 replicates [46,49]. Bias-corrected bootstrap confidence intervals (CIs) of 95% were computed to examine the significance of indirect effects.

4. Results

4.1. Common Method Bias Test and Measurement Validation

Given that cross-sectional data were vulnerable to common method bias (CMB) [50], we first used Harman’s one-factor test to identify its presence. All of the items measuring constructs were set to load on a single factor in exploratory factor analysis. The analysis showed that one component accounted for 33.64% of the variance, which is less than the 50% threshold [50], revealing that CMB was not a serious concern.

Then, we tested the construct validity of our scales using a series of CFAs [50]. We compared our hypothesized three-factor model (inclusive leadership, high-involvement HR practices, and strengths use) with two nested models using χ^2 difference tests. As shown in Table 1, the proposed three-factor model yielded a significantly better fit to the data than other nested models ($\chi^2(269, N = 364) = 772.43$; $p < 0.001$; $\chi^2/df = 2.87$; RMSEA = 0.07; CFI = 0.92; SRMR = 0.05), demonstrating that the constructs inclusive leadership, high-involvement HR practices, and strengths use are distinct from one another (discriminant validity).

Table 1. CFA of Inclusive Leadership, High-involvement HR Practices, and Strengths Use (N = 364).

Model	X^2/df	CFI	SRMR	RMSEA	Model Comparison Test	
					ΔX^2	Δdf
1. Three-Factor Model	2.87	0.92	0.05	0.07	-	-
2. Two-Factor Model	4.42	0.84	0.08	0.10	2 vs. 1	427.58 *
3. One-Factor Model	9.41	0.61	0.13	0.15	3 vs. 1	1787.63 *

Notes: N = 364; * $p < 0.001$ (two-tailed). CFI, comparative fit index; GFI, goodness-of-fit index; RMSEA, root mean square error of approximation. Proposed three-factor model: inclusive leadership, high-involvement HR practices, and strengths use; two-factor model: inclusive leadership and high-involvement HR practices combined as one factor, with strengths use as a separate factor; one-factor model: inclusive leadership, high-involvement HR practices, and strengths use combined as one factor.

4.2. Descriptive Statistics

Table 2 displays descriptive statistics including means, standard deviations, and Pearson's correlation coefficients for the research variables. Inclusive leadership ($r = 0.444$, $p < 0.01$), high-involvement HR practices ($r = 0.619$, $p < 0.01$), and strengths use ($r = 0.549$, $p < 0.01$) were positively related to SE (capability set score), revealing that when there is more inclusive leadership, high-involvement HR practices, and strengths use at the workplace, workers will have a larger capability set. Among the demographics, the SE score was positively related to average weekly working hours ($r = 0.165$, $p < 0.05$), and negatively related to gender ($r = -0.119$, $p < 0.01$), indicating that women experience less SE than men.

Table 2. Means, Standard Deviations, and Pearson's Correlations Among Study Variables (N = 364).

Variable	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. SE	3.53	0.55	-					
2. Inclusive leadership	3.62	0.69	0.444 **	-				
3. High involvement HR practices	3.39	0.59	0.619 **	0.592 **	-			
4. Strengths use	4.23	1.03	0.549 **	0.403 **	0.452 **	-		
5. Gender (1 = male, 2 = female)	-	-	-0.119 *	-0.114 *	-0.098	-0.119 *	-	
6. Age (in years)	45.65	12.44	-0.005	-0.044	-0.033	0.106 *	-0.033	
7. Weekly working hours	31.25	9.86	0.165 *	0.055	0.124 *	0.024	-0.402 **	-0.048

Notes: * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$ (two-tailed). SE = sustainable employability, SD = standard deviation.

4.3. Hypothesis Testing

To test our hypotheses, we conducted two separate structural models: M1 (unmediated) and M2 (mediated). Given that the correlation between age and SE was not significant, we only included gender and weekly working hours as controls for our structural models. The total, direct, and indirect effects for both models are shown in Table 3, while the summary of SEM results for M1 and M2 are depicted in Figure 3. As can be seen in Figure 3, M1 yielded a good fit to the data ($\chi^2(4, N = 364) = 9.52$; $p < 0.05$; $\chi^2/df = 2.38$; RMSEA = 0.06; CFI = 0.99; SRMR = 0.03). In M1, the positive effects of inclusive leadership ($\beta = 0.12$, $p < 0.05$) and high-involvement HR practices ($\beta = 0.54$, $p < 0.001$) on SE were significant. Predictors in M1 explained 39% of the variance in SE. Thus, hypotheses 1 and 2 were supported. These results also indicate that high-involvement HR practices are a stronger predictor of SE than inclusive leadership.

The remaining hypotheses of the study were tested via the mediated M2 model, showing a good fit to the data ($\chi^2(6, N = 364) = 13.07$; $p < 0.05$; $\chi^2/df = 2.17$; RMSEA = 0.05; CFI = 0.99; SRMR = 0.03). A closer examination of Table 3 reveals that inclusive leadership ($\beta = 0.21$, $p < 0.001$) and high-involvement HR practices ($\beta = 0.33$, $p < 0.001$) positively predicted strengths use, thereby supporting hypotheses 3 and 4, respectively. We also observed a significant positive relationship between strengths use and SE ($\beta = 0.34$, $p < 0.001$). Thus, hypothesis 5 was supported. Predictors in M2 explained 48% of the variance in SE. It is also

important to note that the direct effect of high-involvement HR practices is still significant in the mediation model, while this is not the case for inclusive leadership. The indirect effect of inclusive leadership on SE via strengths use in M2 was found to be significant ($\beta = 0.07$, 95% CI = 0.03 to 0.12), as 95% bias-corrected bootstrap lower and upper CIs did not include zero. Thus, hypothesis 6 was supported. Similarly, the indirect effect of high-involvement HR practices on SE via strengths use in M2 was also found to be significant ($\beta = 0.11$, 95% CI = 0.06 to 0.18), supporting hypothesis 7. Put another way, strengths use mediated the positive associations between inclusive leadership, high-involvement HR practices, and SE.

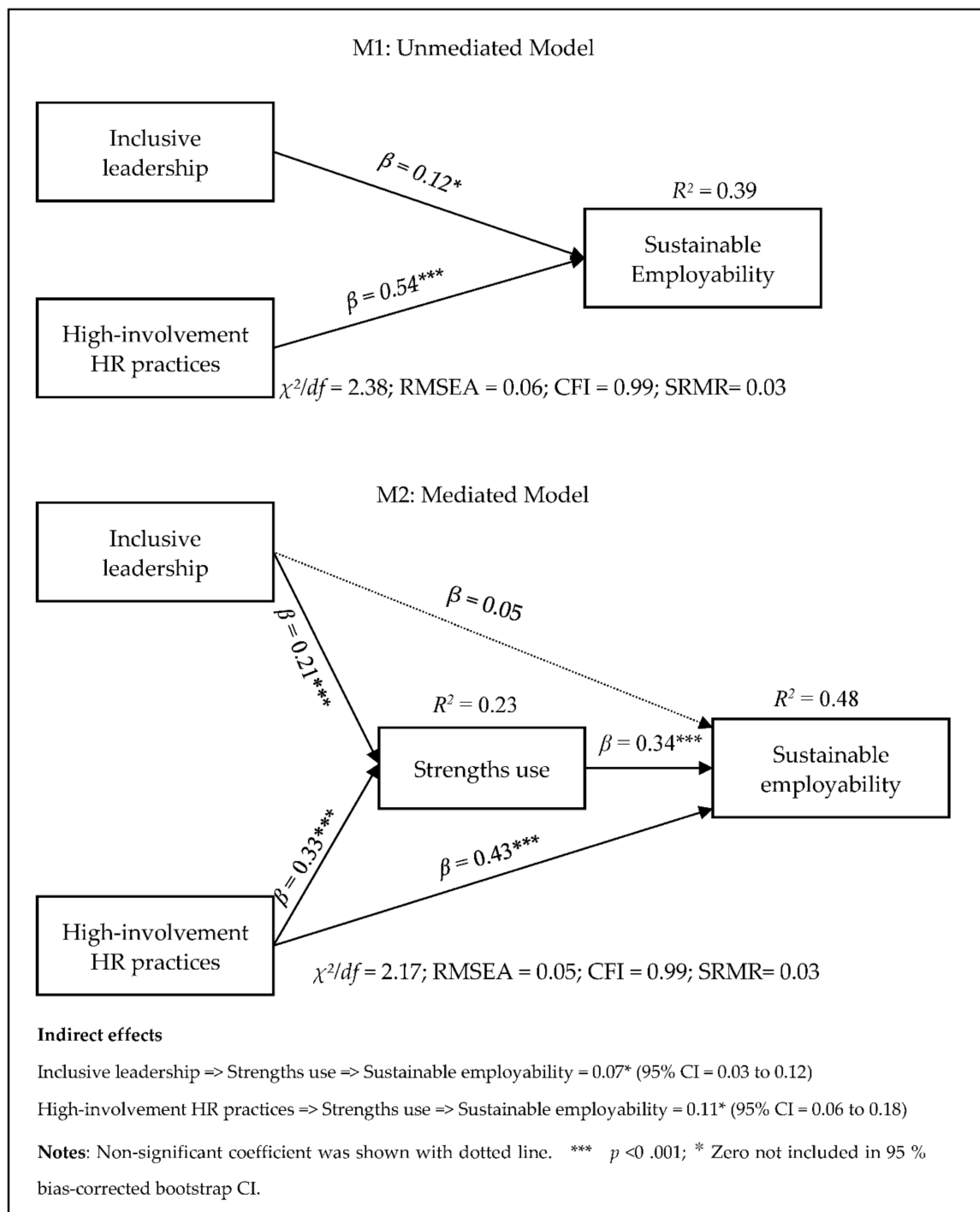


Figure 3. Summary of SEM results.

Table 3. Total, Direct, and Indirect Effects in Structural Equation Models (N = 364).

Paths		Estimate	SE	P	95% CI	
					Lower	Upper
<i>Total Effects</i>						
H1: Inclusive leadership	=>	Sustainable employability	0.12	0.07	*	0.02 0.25
H2: HR practices	=>	Sustainable employability	0.54	0.05	***	0.42 0.66
H3: Inclusive leadership	=>	Strengths use	0.21	0.09	***	0.07 0.33
H4: HR practices	=>	Strengths use	0.33	0.10	***	0.21 0.47
H5: Strengths use	=>	Sustainable employability	0.34	0.02	***	0.25 0.43
Weekly hours	=>	Sustainable employability	0.11	0.02	*	0.03 0.19
Gender	=>	Sustainable employability	0.01	0.05	0.81	-0.06 0.08
<i>Direct effects</i>						
Inclusive leadership	=>	Sustainable employability	0.05	0.07	0.26	-00.02 0.23
HR practices	=>	Sustainable employability	0.43	0.12	***	0.03 0.25
<i>Indirect effects</i>						
		Effect	Boot SE	P	95% Boot CI	
					Lower	Upper
H6: Inclusive leadership => Strengths use=> SE		0.07	0.02	**	0.03	0.12
H7: HR practices => Strengths use => SE		0.11	0.03	**	0.06	0.18

Notes: * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$ (two-tailed). SE = standard error; standardized estimates are reported. Age and gender were controlled. A 95 % bias-corrected bootstrap estimation approach was used for indirect effects with a bootstrap sample size of 5000.

Since cross-sectional studies are vulnerable to reverse causation, we changed the order of the construct and tested it again to see if M2 was better than an inverse model in which SE was a predictor and inclusive leadership and high-involvement HR practices were outcomes. We found that the inversed model yielded a worse fit to the data than M2 ($\chi^2(7, N = 364) = 83.32; p < 0.001; \chi^2/df = 11.90; RMSEA = 0.17; CFI = 0.86; SRMR = 0.07$), revealing that reverse causation might not be the case in the present study.

5. Discussion

This study aimed to investigate whether inclusive leadership and high-involvement HR practices as organizational conversion factors are directly and indirectly (through strengths use) related to workers' SE. In line with our hypotheses, our results reveal that inclusive leadership and high-involvement HR practices are positively related to SE. In addition, we found that the perception of inclusive leadership and high-involvement HR practices enhances perceived strengths use at work and, in turn, SE. In other words, inclusive leadership and high involvement HR practices are indirectly related to SE through strengths use.

5.1. Theoretical Implications

First, our study contributes to the new model of SE based on CA in the literature by providing the first empirical evidence on potential antecedents of SE. Previous research focused on outcomes of SE and found that higher SE was associated with increased task performance, work ability, and job satisfaction and decreased absenteeism and depression [8–10]. However, up to now, potential antecedents were largely ignored, although Van der Klink and colleagues [5] argued that SE could be achieved through organizational conversion factors. Our results reveal that both inclusive leadership behaviors (e.g., being open and accessible, involving workers in decision-making, encouraging subordinates to speak up) and high-involvement HR practices (e.g., providing opportunities to be involved in decision-making, share information, and have role flexibility) [15] can be seen as organizational conversion factors that foster SE by creating a suitable environment and opportunities. As research on the associations between organizational factors and SE is scarce, these results expand our knowledge of how to foster workers' SE in organizations.

Second, the current study adds to strengths use theory [16,51] by illuminating the associations between inclusive leadership, high-involvement HR practices, and strengths use. Previous research on strengths use reported that organizational strengths use support [17], strengths-based leadership [38] and transformational leadership [19] as job resources stimulate individuals' strengths use. We expand this line of research by pinpointing two new job resources (i.e., inclusive leadership behaviors and high-involvement HR practices) that may facilitate individual strengths at work. More specifically, we show that these job resources allow employees to work on tasks that fit their strengths.

Finally, we find that strengths use mediates the relationship between the two organizational factors (inclusive leadership and high-involvement HR practices) and SE helps us to gain a better understanding of the underlying process that may explain why those factors are positively associated with employees' SE. Specifically, we show that when employees report inclusive leadership behaviors from their supervisors or high-involvement HR practices, they feel more autonomous and supported to identify and use their strengths at work. In turn, a greater sense of using their strengths at work leads to higher SE, possibly because they achieved their work values (capability set). These findings are also in line with a prior study reporting that strengths use acts as a mediator in the relationship between strengths-based leadership and psychological well-being [38].

5.2. Practical Implications

Based on this study's findings, we offer several suggestions for companies and practitioners who want to promote SE. First, the positive relationships between high-involvement HR practices, inclusive leadership, and SE signify that organizations can enhance their workers' SE by implementing such practices and employing supervisors who demonstrate such leadership behaviors at work. Thus, organizations should design and implement such practices, including work autonomy, task flexibility, knowledge sharing, involvement in decision-making, job rotation, and broad job design [15,31]. Similarly, organizations can invest in developing their current managers by using leadership development programs that aim to improve inclusive leadership qualities (e.g., being aware of subordinates' needs, being open to new ideas of employees, being easily accessible, and involving subordinates in decision-making) [31].

Second, the mediating role of strengths use in the associations between the two organizational factors (inclusive leadership and high-involvement HR practices) and SE indicates that stimulating employees' strengths use at work acts as a crucial pathway to foster SE. Thus, organizations should encourage their workers to identify and use their strengths at the workplace by implementing several useful tools (e.g., Values in Action Inventory of Strengths [51] or Strengths Finder 2.0 [52]) and designing strengths-based HR practices [34].

5.3. Limitations and Further Research

Although our study is the first to provide evidence on relationships between the conversion factors and the newly developed construct of SE by using a representative Dutch sample via the LISS-panel, we need to still address some limitations. First, the study used a cross-sectional design, in which no causal relationships can be postulated. Future research using a full cross-lagged panel design or experimental design may be conducted in an attempt to improve our understanding of the causal ordering of factors. This is particularly important for measuring SE, as some researchers have argued that SE needs to be captured using multiple time point measurements (e.g., latent growth curve modeling) [22]. Second, all of our measures were self-reported, which may raise questions about common method variance and overestimation of effects, although our CFA proved that the three constructs are distinct. Third, our sample consisted of Dutch working individuals, which might restrict the generalizability of the findings. Given that SE is a topic of growing concern particularly for European countries [53], whether the associations observed in this study are also relevant to different nations and cultures re-

mains uncertain, thus future studies replicating our findings in other counties may be beneficial. Fourth, although some items of the CSWQ (specifically numbers 3 and 5, see Appendix A) and the inclusive leadership scale appear to be similar, we could not test their distinctiveness by performing CFA, because the CSWQ is not a psychometric scale but an index. Finally, we explored the association between organizational conversion factors, strengths use, and SE. Upcoming research could expand our understanding of the topic by exploring the links between other conversion elements (e.g., family issues, individual motivation) and SE as proposed by Van der Klink [5]. In addition, in a recent follow-up study, Gürbüz et al. [10] found that SE was positively related to important work outcomes including task performance, and job satisfaction. Future research exploring potential mechanisms between SE and work outcomes could contribute to the literature as well.

6. Conclusions

The present study provides initial evidence that inclusive leadership and high-involvement HR practices are directly and indirectly (through strengths use) related to the SE of workers. Although our cross-sectional design restricts us from establishing causal assertions, the results still appear to suggest that workers who experience inclusive leadership behaviors from their leaders and high-involvement HR practices are more likely to identify and use their strengths at work, which in turn foster their SE. Given the associations detected in our study and the significance of SE, both researchers and practitioners need to continue to investigate its antecedents in order to design work and organizational contexts in a sustainable way so that workers are able, willing, and enabled to work until their retirement.

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Appendix A

Appendix A.1. The Capability Set for Work Questionnaire (CSWQ)

The following questions address different aspects of your working life. Question (a) is about how important the different aspects are for you. Question (b) asks about the opportunities in your current employment to realize these aspects. Question (c) asks to what extent you actually achieve these aspects in your current employment.

1	Using Knowledge and Skills	Very Little Extent 1	Little Extent 2	Neutral 3	Large Extent 4	Very Large Extent 5
a	It is <i>important</i> for me to be able to use my knowledge and skills at work.	()	()	()	()	()
b	My current employment offers me enough <i>opportunities</i> to do this.	()	()	()	()	()
c	I <i>manage</i> to actually achieve this.	()	()	()	()	()
2	Developing Knowledge and Skills	Very Little Extent 1	Little Extent 2	Neutral 3	Large Extent 4	Very Large Extent 5
a	It is <i>important</i> for me to be able to develop my knowledge and skills at work.	()	()	()	()	()
b	My current employment offers me enough <i>opportunities</i> to do this.	()	()	()	()	()
c	I <i>manage</i> to actually achieve this.	()	()	()	()	()
3	Being Involved in Important Decisions	Very Little Extent 1	Little Extent 2	Neutral 3	Large Extent 4	Very Large Extent 5
a	It is <i>important</i> for me to be involved in important decisions concerning my work.	()	()	()	()	()
b	My current employment offers me enough <i>opportunities</i> to do this.	()	()	()	()	()
c	I <i>manage</i> to actually achieve this.	()	()	()	()	()
4	Having or Building Meaningful Working Relationships with Others	Very Little Extent 1	Little Extent 2	Neutral 3	Large Extent 4	Very Large Extent 5
a	It is <i>important</i> for me to have or build meaningful relationships at work (e.g., with colleagues or clients).	()	()	()	()	()
b	My current employment offers me enough <i>opportunities</i> to do this.	()	()	()	()	()
c	I <i>manage</i> to actually achieve this.	()	()	()	()	()
5	Setting Your Own Goals	Very Little Extent 1	Little Extent 2	Neutral 3	Large Extent 4	Very Large Extent 5
a	It is <i>important</i> for me to be able to set my own goals at work.	()	()	()	()	()
b	My current employment offers me enough <i>opportunities</i> to do this.	()	()	()	()	()
c	I <i>manage</i> to actually achieve this.	()	()	()	()	()
6	Earning A Good Income	Very Little Extent 1	Little Extent 2	Neutral 3	Large Extent 4	Very Large Extent 5
a	It is <i>important</i> for me to be able to earn a good income.	()	()	()	()	()
b	My current employment offers me enough <i>opportunities</i> to do this.	()	()	()	()	()
c	I <i>manage</i> to actually achieve this.	()	()	()	()	()

7	Making A Meaningful Contribution through My Work	Very Little Extent 1	Little Extent 2	Neutral 3	Large Extent 4	Very Large Extent 5
a	It is <i>important</i> for me to be able to make a meaningful contribution through my work.	()	()	()	()	()
b	My current employment offers me enough <i>opportunities</i> to do this.	()	()	()	()	()
c	I <i>manage</i> to actually achieve this.	()	()	()	()	()

Source: Reference [8].

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