

**CAREER WELLBEING IN THE NEW WORLD OF WORK.  
THE ABILITY TO BE AGILE, ADAPTABLE AND EMBEDDED**

**INAUGURAL LECTURE**

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Senate

- Professor Mogano, Acting Vice-Principal, Teaching Learning, Community Engagement and Student Support;
- Professor Mogale, Executive Dean, College of Economic and Management Sciences;
- Professor Erasmus, former Vice-Principal Operations as respondent;
- Colleagues from the College of Economic and Management Sciences, broader Unisa community and other institutions;
- Friends, associates and family members;
- Distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen

I wish to greet and welcome you all to this inaugural lecture. I am deeply humbled by your introduction, and sincerely grateful for Unisa's recognition of my scholarship. Please accept my warmest appreciation for your profound choice to attend this occasion today which marks my formal acceptance to the professorial rank. I am aware that an even-greater task awaits me, a commitment I take on willingly, and grounded in my academic principles: integrity, excellence, relevance and freedom.

## 1. INTRODUCTION AND ACADEMIC CAREER

I am overjoyed to stand before you today to give an account of my stewardship up to this present moment. The title of my lecture is “**Career wellbeing in the new world of work. The ability to be agile, adaptable and embedded**”. Ladies and gentlemen, my research career has been interesting and has steered me in different directions at times. Most of these paths were experienced as smooth and others gave rise to feelings such as despondency and hope that only strengthened my resilience and resolve to succeed as an academic and researcher. Thank you for sharing in my excitement today. I would have liked to acknowledge all the individuals who played a significant part in my research journey from the start until this point in my career, but due to time limitations please allow me to mention a few people:

- Firstly, I wish to acknowledge my parents (Louis and Amanda Pieterse, and Solly and Lesley Ferreira) for their unconditional love and support;
- My husband, Louis Ferreira, and my children, Luan and Lurike for their patience, love and encouragement;
- Dr Moerane (Chair of the Department of Human Resource Management) for his support;
- Professor Melinde Coetzee as my mentor and inspiration from whom I have learnt to love and show passion for research;
- My friend and colleague Ingrid Potgieter, who embarked with me on this journey right from the very start and inspired me throughout.

For the past few years, my focus has mainly been on the concepts of adaptability and embeddedness in one’s career and how these concepts are needed in order to ascertain career wellbeing in the new world of work. Recently, together with my research team we included the concept career agility as part of our research. Ladies and gentlemen, during the period from 2012 up until today, under the employment of Unisa, I have been able to publish 32 articles in accredited journals, contributed towards academic textbooks and

further had the privilege of contributing 4 chapters in international books intended for the industry and scholars, where I was part of the editorial team as well. These books focused on career meta-capacities, the psychology of retention, career wellbeing and coping in the new world of work. My publications are within the human resource management field. I was blessed to receive confirmation earlier this year that I am now a NRF rated researcher.

**Today I want to depict the importance of career wellbeing in the context of the new world of work.** The HRM (Human Resource Management) student is positioned as both employee and professional practitioner in workplaces that are experiencing massive transformation and turbulence. Educating the HRM student on the attributes that foster career wellbeing has become essential. My research in collaboration with colleagues highlighted three attributes I would like to discuss today: career agility, career adaptability and career embeddedness. These three attributes emerged from research on the impact of changes brought about by the new world of work on individuals' career wellbeing.

## **2. Changes brought about by the new world of work**

The massive transformation of the world of work highlights technological and social changes that need to be considered by the HRM employee and practitioner. These changes require HRM students as practitioners, employees and managers to come to terms with the new work environment, in which flexibility and adaptability have priority over job security and long-term employment, structured environments and standardized roles and responsibilities. Artificial intelligence to robotics and automation are some of the most pertinent changes that come to mind. What we as humans currently do and will do for work in the future is changing completely. Covid-19 imposed the most transformational shifts to work as we know it for perhaps the last 10 years.

Work in the future will still be a key feature in life, as it currently is. With the realities of massive change facing individuals, organisations and sectors, many are thinking about how they can adapt their careers to fit the future. Often the discussion becomes very mechanical in terms of the jobs that will exist and the skills individuals will need to thrive in times of change. While it is an important topic, the bigger issue around future proofing careers is wellbeing. Especially career wellbeing and how to build and maintain wellbeing in the new world of work. As the lines between work and life becomes more blurred due to changes such as working from home, HR managers and our HRM students as professional practitioners are forced to prioritize wellbeing much more in order to ensure career success.

In the new normal career context, uncertainties, complexities, and drastic changes have been a disturbing shock for many employees including the Unisa HRM student. These changes presented complex social and economic challenges, prompting our HRM students as professionals and employees in need of specific career-life counselling and career development guidance (Potgieter, et al., 2021).

This in turn will have an impact on the career wellbeing of employees. Bringing about difficulties where the HRM student as employee and professional practitioner supporting employees as well as managers will find it problematic to distinguish between work and non-work situations and this will negatively affect individuals' ability to be creative and think critically. Career development interventions may have the power to restore the fear and anxiety resulting from the challenges posed by the new normal working context (Coetzee, et al., 2021a).

The new world of work is further bringing about changes to the time and space of work: smart working, agility in the workplace and new virtual inventions. These examples propose a new way of work, empowering the HRM student as employee and professional practitioner for a better work-life balance, as well as, a more effective way of work design,

clearer tasks orientated goals and providing real-time feedback that withstand continuous development and motivation. Keeping these changes in mind, our HRM students as employees and practitioners along with organisations will need to adapt. Employees will be required to develop new competencies and skills, which include agility, adaptability and embeddedness. Organisations will be forced to redesign their current structures, processes and interventions, taking into consideration the challenges posed by the new world of work. This challenging situation requires HRM students as professional practitioners and employees together with the human resource managers to have the necessary interventions in place. The new world of work offers new opportunities to develop a positive social change as well as develop and adopt to new digital and innovative systems and solutions. The new world of work poses a challenge to employees in order to develop a clearer sense of their professional identity and to find the meaning of work (Hirschi, 2019). Our HRM students as employees and professional practitioners and managers need support to change their approaches to be more digitally orientated, more organised and adaptable which is more in line with the new world of work.

The pervasive impact of the changes that confront workplaces led me to consider how the three attributes of career **agility**, career **adaptability** and career **embeddedness** may contribute to individuals' career wellbeing.

### **3. Career Wellbeing**

Career wellbeing can be explained as an "individual's long-term contentment with their career outcomes, career achievements, career changes and their sustainable employability amidst the complexities of the contemporary work environment" (Bester, Coetzee, Ferreira & Potgieter, 2019). Career wellbeing can also be seen as a multi-dimensional construct covering various aspects and experiences within an individual's career path.

Together with my research team, as part of the development of a career wellbeing instrument, we differentiated between three facets of career wellbeing. These include **positive career affect** (which involves feelings of career growth and satisfaction), **career networking/social support** (which involves positive feelings about one's career and social support), and **career meaningfulness** (which involves positive feelings about the value and worth of one's career) (Coetzee et al. (2021c).

**Positive career affect** can further be explained as positive emotions resulting from psychological states. HRM practitioners and managers experiencing high levels of positive career affect mostly feel satisfied with the given conditions to achieve their career goals. Typical positive affective career states of wellbeing include feeling satisfied with one's chosen career and the achievement of career goals, feelings supported within one's career, and feeling that the necessary resources are available to support achieving one's career goals.

**Career networking/social support** refers to the perceptions of an individual that they have a network of people that support their career goals and that this support network can easily be approached to assist in achieving their career goals. HRM practitioner and managers with a high career network/social support psychological state believe that feedback from the social support network may enhance their strengths. Several authors found social support to be an essential coping mechanism to deal with stressful conditions and situations (Ferreira, 2021, Potgieter et al., 2021).

**Career meaningfulness** introduces the belief that one's career has meaning and being involved in this career is a matter of personal choice. HRM practitioners and managers with high career meaningfulness experience their career as worthwhile and valuable and believe that their careers contribute to the bigger picture and enhance their lives (Coetzee et al., 2021c). A sense of purpose (which is related to career meaningfulness) is an essential coping mechanism in stressful or changing working conditions. Career

meaningfulness significantly predicts career resilience, job satisfaction, and career wellbeing as confirmed in the study done by Reich and colleagues (2010). Believing that one's career has meaning creates optimism about the future and denotes motivation to cope with stressful or changing working conditions.

Career wellbeing displays a connection with agility, adaptability, embeddedness and organisational commitment. In sum, by effectively developing our HRM students' as professional practitioners and managers' career agility, career adaptability and career embeddedness, their career wellbeing will most likely be increased amidst the challenges posed by the new world of work.

#### **4. Career Agility**

Career agility is seen as an emerging construct. Agility and flexibility have never before been so critical for employees to try and survive and even grow within their career, especially in the digital era we find ourselves in.

Career agility can be explained as a global construct of career adaptation encircling individuals' self-evaluations regarding their willingness to speedily adapt to, and proactively respond to changes that influence their career success (Coetzee et al, 2020a, 2020b). The construct of career agility has become pertinent in the background of the COVID-19 pandemic which highlighted the need to reassess work flexibility likely to continue in the new normal post-Covid (Akkermans et al, 2020; Coetzee & Schreuder, 2021).

The career agility construct arose in the popular web media as an attribute of adaptivity that denotes appropriate and speedy responsiveness to changes in the world of work (Coetzee et al., 2020a; Cornerstone, 2020; Konstant, 2020). The ability for individuals to be agile adaptive enables them to control personal abilities in a manner that exploits new

career opportunities for continuous growth and learning and sustaining one's career and employability (Giulioni, 2021; Konstant, 2020).

In collaboration with two other colleagues we have developed the only empirically tested career agility measure. We empirically operationalised the concept of career agility as an attribute of adaptive readiness or willingness to adapt and proactively respond to changes that influence individuals' agentic use of career adaptability resources for their career wellbeing, success, and satisfaction (Coetzee et al., 2020a, 2020b).

Further, research indicates career agility as an outcome of career wellbeing in the coping context (Coetzee, 2021). The concept is further explained as three facets that account for career agility: (i) technological adaptivity, (ii) agile learning, and (iii) career navigation.

**Technological adaptivity** measures individuals' activated agency, cognitive openness, and positive affective state toward technological change. Technological adaptive individuals exhibit efficiency in actively updating their skills and knowledge in order to capitalise on the new growth opportunities of accelerated technological developments (Coetzee, 2021; Coetzee et al, 2020a, 2020b).

**Agile learning** measures an individual's activated intrinsic motivation and positive affect to actively set and manage career goals for new learning opportunities that will expand their skills and knowledge, and enhance their career success (Coetzee, 2021; Coetzee et al, 2020a, 2020b).

Lastly, **career navigation** measures the proactive idea of new job and career opportunities in the changing employment environment, and the willingness to proactively navigate and adapt to change (Coetzee et al., 2020a, 2020b; Savickas, 2013). Together,

these three facets of career agility promote the efficient building of the personal career adaptability resources needed to achieve career goals in the uncertain changing employment context of the digital era (Coetzee, 2021).

## **5. Career Adaptability**

Career adaptability is the ability to deal with change and various demands in the workplace. Career adaptability is important for employees to function effectively in the workplace as well as for their career wellbeing. Career development is evaluated within the framework of the career construction theory developed by Savickas (Savickas, 2013). Within the career construction theory, career development integrates employees' personal needs with their social expectations as well as their ability to adapt to the working environment.

Researchers define career adaptability as the skill to “constructively regulate psycho-behavioural functions in response to new, changing, and/or uncertain circumstances, conditions and situations” (Martin et al., 2019). It further promotes employees to manage and adapt their career development tasks, workplace transitions and disturbances. Employees can adapt more easily within their career, if they, as employees can anticipate the challenges and find suitable solutions to overcome these career changes (Savickas, 2013). To date, career adaptability has been widely explored as a specific resource for career choice and development among employees (Hirschi, 2009).

The career wellbeing of employees can be boosted by means of the development or strengthening of their career adaptability. Researchers found that career adaptability can support employees to be prepared for, and having the necessary resources, to cope with work distresses, career development tasks, and changes in their careers throughout their whole lifespan. Employees should aim to take more interest in their career prospects, strive to achieve better control over their occupational future, demonstrate more curiosity

about imminent career opportunities and aim to increase the confidence with which they pursue their goals.

Career adaptability consists of four main psychological resources which include: (Savickas & Porfeli, 2012).

- (1) **Concern** – referring to the planning, expectancy and mindfulness of one's future;
- (2) **Control** – referring to taking full responsibility for constructing one's career through decisive, assertive and reliable actions;
- (3) **Curiosity** – referring to taking initiative learning about the world of work that leads to information seeking behaviours and curiosity to openness to new experiences, inquisitive exploration, and reflection about the fit between self and the world of work and lastly
- (4) **Confidence** – referring to serious engagement in designing one's occupational future and executing the plans in order to actualise one's choices.

Understanding and developing our HRM students as practitioners and managers their career adaptability profile may directly affect their career wellbeing.

## **6. Career Embeddedness**

The pandemic and the new world of work have revived individuals' career agency and self-regulation in fulfilling their career goals amidst the uncertainty of changing job markets. Individuals appear to have become more committed toward the management of their careers rather than being committed to the organisations for which they work. In times of rapid change, organisations have a dire need for employees to remain psychologically attached and committed to their work for optimal sustainable organisational performance and survival.

Career embeddedness is a recent construct denoting career identity as being deeply situated within the organisation because of a web of career-supportive organisational practices and relational networks, including a satisfactory fit between personal career values and organisational culture and values (Ferreira & Coetzee, 2020). The construct of career embeddedness evolved from the basic views of person-environment (P-E) fit theory and research (Van Vianen, 2018). The P-E fit theory suggests that individuals' careers take shape at the intersection between the social environment (e.g. organisation) that provides career and work opportunities in line with individuals' psychological career needs in exchange for their talents and capabilities that add to the performance and sustainability of the organisation. The embedded or disembedded nature of an individual's career is closely dependent on the presence (or absence) of a system of supportive practices and relations that facilitate the psychological fulfillment of career development needs and the expression of personal career values. However, being a recent construct developed by a colleague and I, research on career embeddedness currently seems non-existent (Ferreira & Coetzee, 2020).

Drawing from the work of Coetzee and Bester (2021), we argue that the psychological fulfillment of basic career development needs including the expression of career values in the P-E interaction facilitates individuals' sense of career embeddedness, and hence their affective commitment towards the organisation.

We differentiate between two dimensions of psychological career identity needs underpinning the construct of career embeddedness, which include (Ferreira & Coetzee, 2020):

- (1) career development fit and
- (2) career values fit.

**Career development fit** relates to the psychological need for making career progress and having future career options and promotional opportunities in the organisation.

Career development fit also involves a need for relationship networks and organisational conditions that support one's career growth, upskilling and continuous learning for enhanced marketability and employability.

**Career values fit** relates to the perceived compatibility between personal career identity needs and career values and those of the organisational culture and values. Drawing from the P-E fit theory, the career values fit facet of career embeddedness relates to the supplementary fit dimension of P-E fit which views career development needs and career values as playing a fundamental role in the career identity management process (Guan et al., 2021). Career development needs and career values serve as relatively stable goals that direct individuals toward their goals and that allow need satisfaction in a societal context. Career values are generally expressed by individuals to guide their career choices and to define subjective career success.

I will now continue to provide some practical implications that can be considered in order to enhance the HRM student as practitioner and manager's career agility, career adaptability and career embeddedness in order to ensure overall career wellbeing.

## **7. Practical implications for career wellbeing**

The increasing change in the current work environment, specifically considering the changes brought about by the new world of work, offers several opportunities for career development support practices that the HRM student as professional practitioner can assist workplaces with. Keeping up with the latest trends in the workplace and occupations might offer individuals new employment opportunities and career prospects. Career development practices which the HRM student as practitioner can assist with, can play an active and increasing role in assisting employees to make sense of the changes, further assisting them to obtain, evaluate and apply the new-found career-related

information in their career decision making process and career planning paths. Moreover, HRM practitioners can assist employees in developing the necessary skills, to adapt more easily to the constant change in their current work environment through ongoing education and learning.

Human resource practitioners in collaboration with other professionals such as the industrial psychologist, can use these workplace changes as a call to act and develop more integrated online- and technologically-assisted career interventions into their assessments and to further include researchers as evaluators of the effectiveness of these approaches. This might include an adaptive assessment of an employee's career concerns guided by custom-made, computerised interview questions and assessments followed by personalised recommendations for activities to support self-directed career management and career wellbeing.

Further developing individuals' agility, adaptability and embeddedness skills may improve employees' overall career wellbeing. Research reveals that employees with well-developed adaptability skills were more likely to show positive outcomes relating to their life satisfactions, stress levels and overall employee wellbeing (Urbanaviciute, Udayar & Rossier, in press).

By assisting HRM students as practitioners, employees and managers to develop and enhance their levels of career adaptability, may assist them to become more proactive in addressing workplace challenges and managing challenging situations. The development and enhancement of employees' career adaptability may assist them in establishing agency in the broader work context, beyond their work environment. Career adaptability development may be beneficial to both employees' career wellbeing and general wellbeing. The HRM practitioner in collaboration with other professionals such as the industrial psychologist, should focus on enhancing employees' readiness to cope with unpredictable changes promoted by changeable work conditions (for example

adaptability). Interventions which include the design and application of programmes that promote career agility, adaptability and embeddedness resources can be used by HRM practitioners in collaboration with other behavioural professionals within organisations. The assessment of these resources can further be used as a screening tool by HRM practitioners assisting with career development. Employees showing a presence in these career adaptability resources indicate crucial strengths that individuals can use as they develop throughout their career path. The importance of these interventions lies in their design, implementation and evaluation, due to the challenges experienced in the current workplace, specifically in the new world of work context.

Career adaptability is relevant for post-career choice work adjustment and may be an important aspect for HRM students as practitioners and managers to focus on. It may be beneficial to HRM practitioners, managers and organisations to nurture career adaptability resources and recognize certain work experiences fostering career adaptability resources and responses.

The **goal of this lecture** was also to assist HRM students in their role as professional practitioners and managers seeking to develop meaningful career wellbeing interventions by not only unpacking the concepts career agility, career adaptability and career embeddedness, but also providing information on possible career wellbeing strategies. The following are key strategies for organisations to consider when designing career wellbeing interventions.

- Developing career wellbeing interventions must take into consideration the sub-aspects of career agility, adaptability and embeddedness.

Organisations should consider introducing policies and training interventions for managers and employees focused on these variables which should all be aligned to organisational strategies and goal.

- The role of the HRM student as practitioner and manager need to be revised. Self-regulatory career behaviour and the different skills forming part of it need to be understood. By fully understanding what career agility, adaptability and embeddedness entail, the HRM student as practitioner, employee and manager will be able to guide employees successfully in their career choices to enhance their career wellbeing.
- Employees can engage in self-reflection when receiving feedback on their self-regulatory career behaviour (career agility, career adaptability and career embeddedness) at a more interpersonal level.
- Interventions to facilitate the development of career agility, career adaptability and career embeddedness, should be implemented more by human resource practitioners in collaboration with health practitioners such as industrial psychologists and employee wellness practitioners and managers to enhance employees' career wellbeing.

At a more practical level, if HRM students as practitioners and managers better understand the self-regulatory career behaviours and their facets when considering employees' career wellbeing, it will create a positive impact on the career wellbeing of employees. We can further consider how we can integrate career wellbeing and the attributes of career agility, career adaptability and career embeddedness in the HRM curriculum to ensure that our HRM students are prepared for the role as practitioners who are able to foster career wellbeing, career agility, adaptability and embeddedness in the changing workplace.

## **8. Conclusion**

Colleagues, ladies and gentlemen, the key argument posed in this lecture is that when HRM students as practitioners, employees and managers' abilities such as career agility,

career adaptability and career embeddedness are nurtured and enhanced, it will result in HRM practitioners experiencing higher levels of career wellbeing.

Against the backdrop of a rapidly evolving technology driven employment context, and the dire need to help employees adapt to changing careers, occupations and jobs, the three concepts and their measuring instruments discussed in this lecture are psychometrically sound measures and tools with high prospects for valid use by adult workers in the new normal world post-COVID-19 context. Future research on these measuring instruments would help to further refine the measures and test their predictive validity in terms of other career-related constructs of career adaptation.

Wellbeing and specifically career wellbeing have become a prominent focus of many organisations because of the changing nature of the workplace due to the digital era. This lecture contributes new insights that might stimulate the renewal of the HRM curriculum and future research on the attributes influencing employees' career wellbeing in the context of the new world of work.

Colleagues, ladies and gentlemen, I wish to thank you once more for affording me the time to listen to this lecture today and I look forward to your ongoing support as I continue my human resource management journey. The next step in my journey is to expand my research on an international level and to broaden my research topics to consider moderators and mediators of these career attributes and their interaction effects on talent retention, specifically in the competitive digital new normal career space, at a more personal and organisational level. Thank you and may the Lord bless you in abundance.

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