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International Pathways and Processes

Edited by

E. Anne Marshall and Jennifer E. Symonds

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Ready, Set, Go!

School-to-Work Transition in the New Career

*Jos Akkermans, Rowena Blokker, Corine Buers,
Beatrice Van der Heijden, and Ans De Vos*

Introduction

The transition that young adults experience during their emerging adulthood when they finish their education and enter the labor market has been a prominent topic of discussion for decades. This period is extremely turbulent for those young individuals, as they go through many major changes—such as facing the responsibilities of a job for the first time and exploring one’s vocational identity in new ways—in a relatively brief period of time (Arnett, 2000, 2007; McKee-Ryan, Song, Wanberg, & Kinicki, 2005). Moreover, a large body of scientific literature has shown that individual pathways at the school-to-work transition (STWT) are of crucial importance for young adults’ chances of attaining long-term career success (e.g., Pinguart, Juang, & Silbereisen, 2003; Schoon & Silbereisen, 2009). In addition, the STWT also has important implications for employing organizations and society in general, in terms of costs related to sickness absence and unused potential (Morrison, 2002). Following from this, it is clear that the STWT is an essential period during emerging adulthood that young people need to manage as successfully as possible to provide a basis for securing sustainable labor participation.

Research on the STWT from a careers perspective has a rich tradition starting approximately halfway through the 20th century. For example, Super (1957) and Holland (1959) touched upon this topic in their discussions of several career development models. Traditionally, the STWT was positioned as a predictable, structured career path in which individuals would either finish education or drop out and then enter stable employment and preferably remain with that employer for life (i.e., lifetime employment). Accordingly, obtaining long-term employment and learning job-related skills were conceived to be core indicators of a smooth STWT.

Yet, during the past few decades, many major changes in the labor markets have caused the STWT to become more complex and challenging (Brzinsky-Fay & Solga, 2016; Cebulla & Whetton, 2018), making it harder and more complex for young adults to successfully transition to the labor market than before (Lechner, Tomasik & Silbereisen, 2016). In general, careers have become longer and more complex as the result of several key labor market developments (Vuori, Toppinen-Tanner, & Mutanen, 2012).

First, labor markets have changed, from being primarily oriented on manufacturing, toward a service-oriented sharing economy. This has led to a fundamental shift in necessary knowledge and skills and, as a result, has increased the difficulty level of many jobs (Schoon, 2007). This development also puts additional pressure on young individuals from different educational levels and with different types of jobs (e.g., blue collar vs. white collar).

Second, the contemporary labor market is characterized by discontinuities in work (e.g., being laid off after reorganization or the “last in, first out” principle) and by serious challenges all working staff have to deal with, such as unemployment and underemployment (Haase, Heckhausen, & Köller, 2008; McKee-Ryan & Harvey, 2011). In fact, these issues have been most problematic for young adults entering the labor market for the first time (Akkermans, Nykänen, & Vuori, 2015b) also because they are often employed in temporary positions (Aronson, Callahan, & Davis, 2015; De Lange, Gesthuizen, & Wolbers, 2012).

Third, students are increasingly overloaded with information during their studies (e.g., because of massive online opportunities for information) and at the same time face a trend toward mass higher education (Tomlinson, 2008) and an increasingly complex labor market (MacLeod, Riehl, Saavedra, & Urquiola, 2017). Therefore, the importance of paying careful attention to connecting education with work is increasing. Unfortunately, scholars have argued that the coordination between the two has actually been declining (Heinz, 2009). As a result, these two worlds are still not especially well-connected academically nor in the perception of young adults, and this creates serious problems for graduates during the STWT.

Fourth, traditional definitions of a successful STWT have typically focused on success criteria such as obtaining stable and long-term employment. However, this is no longer the case in many countries as work has become more flexible and short-term and there is a growing number of self-employed workers (Kalleberg, 2009). Indeed, it is taking young adults ever longer to find their first job (Koivisto, Vuori, & Vinokur, 2010), let alone find stable employment (Ling & O’Brien, 2013).

Following from the previous discussion, it is not surprising that young adults have recently been described as the losers in a globalizing world (Blossfeld, Klijzing, Mills, & Kurz, 2005) and “the lost generation” (Wolbers, 2016, p. 51). For these reasons, we argue that to gain a thorough understanding of the STWT in today’s dynamic world of work, it needs to be analyzed from a careers perspective. The primary aim of this chapter, therefore, is to examine the STWT through the lens of the contemporary career. In doing so, we will shed light on some of the major developments that are influential in explaining whether and how young adults might thrive during emerging adulthood and, particularly, in their early careers.

There are integral connections between the concepts of the STWT and the contemporary career, for in both people need fundamentally different knowledge, skills, and abilities to flourish in their education and work than before. Contrary to the traditional perspective, young adults can no longer expect predictable career patterns, nor can they passively wait until opportunities come “knocking at the door” (Ng & Feldman, 2007; Vogt, 2018). Indeed, today’s young adults are expected to take ownership of their own career and proactively craft their own careers to be successful (Akkermans, Brenninkmeijer, Schaufeli, & Blonk, 2015a; Akkermans & Tims, 2017). Thus, the concept of agency has become dominant in discussions of an adaptive STWT. At the same time, it would be too simple to state that young adults are the only responsible party in their own career success. Career agency always occurs in context (De Vos, Van der Heijden, & Akkermans, 2020; Schoon, 2007; Schoon & Lyons-Amos, 2016) and even with growing individualization and the need for proactivity, the educational and vocational contexts in which the STWT takes place have a major influence on this process (Schoon & Lyons-Amos, 2017; Anders & Dorsett, 2017). In sum, this requires linking micro, meso, and macro frames of references to be able to examine the process accurately and understand which factors contribute to an adaptive STWT.

This chapter focuses on the STWT in the contemporary career. First, given that the STWT occurs within an organizational and societal context, both individual (i.e., micro-level) and structural (i.e., meso-level and macro-level) factors will be discussed that are at the foundation of a sustainable and adaptive STWT. Second, because research has clearly established the role of education and skill level (also see Akkermans et al., 2015b), we will argue that an adaptive STWT may be different for young individuals from different educational backgrounds. Next, we will introduce two topics that have a crucial role in contemporary early career success: career competencies and employability.

Finally, we will present and discuss several issues that we argue need further scientific exploration and testing.

Before we proceed, it is important to reflect on what we define as a successful way to transition to the labor market. To do so, we clarify our use of the term *adaptive STWT*. Scholars have used many different words in researching the STWT, most notably *successful STWT*. However, this term has a normative element, which would suggest that there is “only one right way” to transition into working life. For this reason, we choose the term *adaptive*, which suggests a process in which young adults manage to adapt to their new circumstances well (cf. person–career fit; Cha, Kim, & Kim, 2009; De Vos et al., 2020) and which has already been used by many prominent STWT scholars (e.g., Blustein, Philips, Jobin-Davis, Finkelberg, & Roarke, 1997; Tomasik, Hardy, Haase, & Heckhausen, 2009). It is also consistent with the core tenet of the protean career literature, which states that that self-awareness and adaptability are the key ingredients of contemporary careers (Hall, 2002). Although an adaptive transition can take many forms (Blustein et al., 1997), it generally concerns both objective/structural elements (e.g., finding a job and preventing underemployment) and subjective/individual elements (e.g., job and career satisfaction). Following from this, we define an adaptive STWT as the process during which young adults are able to transition into the labor market, perform well, achieve person–career fit, and develop in their work and early career, with the aim of securing employment and laying the foundation for a sustainable career.

Adaptive STWT and Sustainable Careers: The Role of Agency and Structure

The importance of an adaptive STWT as described here, calls for further understanding of those factors facilitating this state. In this section, we explore the role of individual agency as well as structural factors, thereby taking a broad career perspective. From a careers perspective, the notion of an adaptive STWT is closely linked with the recent notion of sustainable careers, that is, the sequence of an individual’s career experiences, reflected through a variety of patterns of continuity over time, crossing several social spaces, and characterized by individual agency, herewith providing meaning to the individual (De Vos et al., 2020; Van der Heijden & De Vos, 2015). One could say that the transition from school to work represents an important initial sequence within an individual’s career sustainability.

STWT From the Perspective of Sustainable Careers

Based on the work of Van der Heijden and De Vos (2015), De Vos et al. (2020) describe three dimensions that have important implications for the sustainability (i.e., long-term happiness, health, and productivity) of the careers of all workers: the person, the context, and time. We argue that these changes also pose particular challenges when it comes to realizing an adaptive STWT for young people.

First, the *person* is connected to changes in individual agency and meaning. Notwithstanding the many influential (structural) factors on all levels (i.e., personal circumstances, job, organization, profession, and society) that shape careers, a career is owned by an individual, and he or she is the one that has to idiosyncratically deal with, and respond to, stability and/or change in the world of work (Briscoe & Hall, 2006). In contemporary careers, individual agency is the key to continuous career success. Indeed, the individual—with young adults entering the labor market being no exception—is considered as the primary owner of their career, and this ownership comes together with an increased responsibility in a world wherein everything is extremely complex, with a mass of choices. Related to this, the *meaning* within careers has also changed over time. That is, careers are typically no longer a mere succession of related jobs, arranged in a hierarchy, through which persons move in an ordered sequence (Baruch, 2006). In that perspective, there is a rather narrow view on what a successful career entails (i.e., realizing upward progress through the hierarchy of an organization). In contrast, nowadays, subjective career success has come to the forefront. This refers to all kinds of aspects of career experiences that are valued by an individual, such as making an impact, having meaningful relations, and being satisfied with one's career (Mayhofer et al., 2016; Shockley et al., 2016; Spurk, Hirschi, & Dries, 2019). This implies that the meaning of career success will be determined by matching one's experience to one's internal career anchors (Schein, 1985). In terms of the STWT, such changes in career meaningfulness have important implications for how careers are examined and evolve. More specifically, not only do young workers need to learn how to do their jobs and self-manage this process, they also need to develop strong reflective skills and think about what their careers mean to them.

Second, regarding the *time* dimension: Careers have not only become longer but also less predictable due to a rapidly changing socioeconomic environment (Vickerstaff, 2003). For young people, this means that it is harder to predict where their early career steps might bring them. To illustrate, a recent report by the World Economic Forum (2016) states that even for technical

studies, almost 50% of the knowledge and know-how acquired during the first year of a four-year study is outdated at the time of graduation. Furthermore, certain events can occur during the STWT that were unforeseen, such as unexpectedly losing one's first job due to a large reorganization or finding one's first job much earlier than expected (cf. career shocks; Akkermans, Seibert, & Mol, 2018) and that can have a long-term impact in one's career sustainability. From a broader view, this means that STWT is not a one-off event but rather a dynamic process that evolves over time.

Third, there are changes in the *context* within which careers evolve. Careers reflect the relationships between people and employing organizations or institutions and how these relationships fluctuate over time (Arthur, Hall, & Lawrence, 1989). Careers are at the intersection between both and, as such, are influenced by factors that stem from individuals' life spheres (e.g., family or one's broader life context) and by factors situated in the organization (e.g., recruitment policies and developmental opportunities). Both, in turn, are situated within a broader societal context that is also affecting individuals' career experiences (Greenhaus & Kossek, 2014). This element of context has also undergone substantial changes over the past decades. Obviously, these changes have made careers more complex. As an individual's career is no longer limited to a single or only a few employment settings over time, the "career playing field" is seemingly endless. Especially young individuals may perceive more career opportunities than ever before, but this also brings uncertainty, higher risks, and a variety of potential transition pathways (Brzinsky-Fay & Solga, 2016). Consequently, this stresses the need for individuals to actively take charge of their career, as we emphasized earlier, while trying to navigate the various contexts in which they operate.

Individual Agency and Adaptive STWT

Individuals change psychologically as they go through important transitions in life and this is especially the case for young graduates (Koen, Klehe, & Van Vianen, 2012; Mackenzie Davey & Arnold, 2000). Graduates are confronted with the challenges of defining career goals, searching for a job, and discovering what is expected from them, which often leads to feelings of uncertainty (Mackenzie Davey & Arnold, 2000; Sturges, Guest, & Mackenzie Davey, 2000). Added to these challenges, and as previously argued, they also need to proactively self-manage their early career: figuring out in which types of jobs, organizations, or sectors they would like to work. Identifying

their competencies and relevant experiences, writing their CV, scanning job advertisements, attending job fairs, and preparing themselves for job interviews are just a few of the many actions young adults need to undertake to find a satisfying job. These behaviors are examples of what has been called “proactive career behaviors,” that is, individuals’ active attempts to build their careers rather than a passive response to the situation as a given (Seibert, Kraimer, & Crant, 2001). They include both a reflective (e.g., career planning and self-awareness about career ambitions and talents) and a behavioral (e.g., networking, sending out one’s CV, and asking for advice) component (De Vos & Soens, 2008).

Within the career literature, there appears to be a consensus among contemporary academics that proactive career behaviors often help people to attain desired career outcomes and to experience general feelings of career success throughout the life course (e.g., Sturges, Conway, Guest, & Liefoghe, 2005; Sturges, Guest, Conway, & Mackenzie Davey, 2002). Although a major body of research in this field focuses on employees who are already at work and, recently, also on older workers, individual agency is no doubt also a critical success factor for young graduates entering the labor market (e.g., Akkermans & Tims, 2017; De Vos & Segers, 2013; Sturges et al., 2002; 2005). Indeed, agency might be even more important for young people given the many decisions they must make in the exploration stage of their career, the uncertain and ambiguous context they face, and the lack of a structural framework offered by an organizational context or chosen occupational path. In other words, from the perspective of situational strength theory (Barrick & Mount, 1993), the STWT represents a “weak” situation characterized by many ambiguous demands, absence of a fixed script, and lack of strong cues signaling what behavior is needed for successful adaptation. Consequently, individuals have considerable discretion in how to behave, making it more likely that individual factors come to the forefront in explaining an adaptive STWT.

From the perspective of sustainable careers, proactive career behaviors are important as they might have a long-term impact on vocational outcomes and future career success (Koen et al., 2012). Given that career sequences are becoming increasingly unpredictable throughout the life course and careers, more “boundaryless” (considering time and context dimensions of sustainable careers), it is important for young adults to develop career competencies that allow them to navigate their own career in view of their personal career success criteria (considering agency and meaning dimensions of sustainable careers). Otherwise, they might find themselves passively responding to those job opportunities to which they have the most easy access, despite these

mismatching with their real interests or talents, and possibly resulting in underemployment (Koen et al., 2012).

Existing scholarly work supports the idea that proactivity facilitates an adaptive STWT. To illustrate, Brown, Cober, Kane, Levy, and Shalhoop (2006) found that proactive personality affects successful job searching and that this relationship is mediated by job search self-efficacy and job search behaviors. In another study, it was shown that young graduates who enacted networking behaviors before graduation reported higher levels of both objective and subjective career success in the early years of their career (De Vos, De Clippeleer, & Dewilde, 2009). Thus, in parallel with what has been found in studies addressing employed individuals, young people who are aware of their personal motives, their talents, and the labor market context and who engage in self-management behaviors like career exploration, networking, and planning (e.g., Zikic & Hall, 2009) are more likely to find a job that is in line with their expectations. In other words, individual agency affects both the likelihood of finding a job (i.e., *quantitative dimension*), and the likelihood of that job matching their expectations and providing stable employment prospects (i.e., *qualitative dimension*; e.g., Taylor, 2005).

Moreover, individual factors such as career self-efficacy (i.e., employees' beliefs about the capacity to realize a successful career), optimism, and ambition (De Vos et al., 2009) will impact the likelihood that young adults engage in proactive career behaviors. Nurmi, Salmela-Aro, and Koivisto (2002) summarize this in terms of three requirements: (a) a high level of interest in personal goals, (b) perceptions of efficacy to attain those goals, and (c) positive emotions that motivate behavior toward attainment of those goals. This is consistent with the dimensions of proactive motivation discerned by Parker, Bindl and Strauss (2010): "can do" (self-efficacy and context beliefs), "reason to" (autonomous career goals), and "energized to" (positive affect; p.830). Hirschi, Lee, Porfeli, and Vondracek (2013) found that these three types of motivation significantly predict career behaviors, and we argue that they might, therefore, be important indicators of an adaptive STWT.

Together, these findings point out that individual characteristics and proactive behaviors are important for an adaptive STWT. Therefore, to facilitate young adults in their STWT in the contemporary career landscape, it is important to make them aware of the important role they are playing in their own career development. Interventions such as career guidance can help them become more aware of their career expectations and learn more about what types of proactive career behaviors are needed to find relevant job opportunities and increase their chances for an adaptive STWT.

Structural Factors and Adaptive STWT

Despite the current emphasis on agency in contemporary careers literature, individuals' careers do not develop in a vacuum but are affected by the multiple contexts in which they evolve: the organizational context and the broader labor market, the policy measures taken by governments, initiatives from labor market intermediaries, and also the private context of individuals' personal lives (Arthur et al., 1989; De Vos et al., 2020; Greenhaus & Kossek, 2014). Applied to the STWT, contextual elements will determine the opportunities but also the obstacles that individuals may have to overcome in making an adaptive transition from school to work (Okay-Sommerville & Scholarios, 2014; Akkermans et al., 2015b).

More specifically, careers are part of a wide eco-system, which operates across internal and external labor markets and in which many different inter-related actors and factors may impact the career opportunities and outcomes of individuals (Baruch, 2015). To fully understand (early) careers, one must realize the influences of these multiple career contexts and the changes occurring within them, the career actors who take part in the play, and the dynamic nature of the system. The sustainability of individuals' careers relies not on their stability but on their ability to adjust, develop, and fit an ever-changing work environment (Baruch, 2015). These factors are situated in different levels of context.

Think, for instance, about labor market policies determined by policymakers or recruitment policies of companies (cf. Baruch & Rousseau, 2019). With little prior work experience or professional networks, young people often have difficulties finding suitable employment when they enter the labor market because employers can set high expectations in terms of previous work experience. Especially during economically hard times, when there are fewer vacancies and young graduates have to compete with more senior profiles, an adaptive STWT might not be self-evident (Aronson, Callahan & Davis, 2015; De Lange, Gesthuizen & Wolbers, 2014). This might not only be demotivating for young adults; it might also be risky for the sustainability of their careers in the long run. And, even worse, recurrently receiving negative answers from employers about their candidacy for job vacancies might lower their self-efficacy and their motivation for sustained effort in searching for a job that is in line with their career interests and talents. The setbacks and barriers experienced during the transition from school to work thus threaten the successful start of one's career (cf. Blokker, Akkermans, Tims, Jansen, & Khapova, 2019), and they might also have a longer-lasting impact on the sustainability of a career when this leads to quantitative or qualitative underemployment,

prolonged unemployment, and negative consequences for career motivation (Koen et al., 2012).

Contextual factors affecting the sustainability of careers are not only situated at the societal and organizational level. Also, young people's personal context might facilitate or hinder an adaptive STWT. For instance, Blustein et al. (2002) found that social class plays a pivotal role in how young workers' experience the transition into working life: young people working in low-skilled jobs reported lower interest in work as a source of personal satisfaction, less crystallization of their self-concept, less access to external resources, and lower levels of career adaptability compared to peers from a higher social class. This implies that young peoples' personal context (i.e., social class) provides boundary conditions that facilitate (i.e., higher social class) or hinder (i.e., lower social class) the STWT.

Accordingly, we can conclude that career sustainability might already be at risk during emerging adulthood for certain groups of young adults, herewith making an adaptive STWT especially crucial. Indeed, it calls attention to ensuring an inclusive approach for schools or career counselors guiding young adults in their early career choices in order to avoid the so-called Matthew effect (De Vos, Dujardin, Gielens, & Meyers, 2017; Forrier, De Cuyper, & Akkermans, 2018): Those individuals who are already more intrinsically motivated when it comes to their career development, who are more ambitious, or who have a higher work centrality are more likely to also engage in proactive career behaviors, which might, in turn, increase their chances for an adaptive STWT. Contrarily, those individuals scoring lower on intrinsic career motivation, ambition, or work centrality are less likely to take a proactive stance toward their career, thereby lowering their chances for an adaptive STWT. In this context, interventions meant to enhance young people's career resources, such as their career competencies (e.g., Akkermans et al., 2015a; Koen et al., 2012), are of utmost importance. For example Akkermans et al. (2015a) demonstrated how a relatively short career development intervention (i.e., five sessions lasting four hours each) can be effectively implemented within an educational or organizational context to help young employees develop their career competencies, self-efficacy, resilience against setbacks, career self-management behaviors, employability, and work engagement.

In sum, in an increasingly unpredictable and complex world of work, individuals are viewed as the primary responsible agent for their own career and career success and for aligning these with their subjective values. Yet, at the same time, we cannot ignore the social context in which careers take place, as this has a major influence on attaining an adaptive STWT.

In the previous section, we reflected on the four dimensions of sustainable careers applied to the early career of young adults. However, to fully examine and understand the potential of creating sustainable early careers, it is important to consider several further issues. First, we will discuss the role of educational level, as extant literature has shown its important role during the STWT. Second, we will argue that especially career competencies and employability may be crucial indicators of an adaptive STWT during early careers.

STWT Differences Between and Within Educational Groups

Research has indicated that young adults experience and cope with the STWT very differently. Some young adults start their careers smoothly and integrate well into the labor market, whereas others face more difficulties after leaving education (Blossfeld, 2008; Buyens, De Vos, Heylen, Mortelmans, & Soens, 2006). Although many factors impact the STWT of young adults, educational credentials are one of the key determinants of an adaptive STWT (e.g., Yates, 2005; Müller, 2005; Di Stasio, 2014).

Differences Between Educational Levels

Studies investigating differences *between* educational levels show that an individual's level of education positively impacts the STWT in terms of employment status, job quality, and career prospects. Highly educated (i.e., higher vocational and university level) labor market entrants are less likely to be unemployed and more rapidly attain their first employment (Eurostat, 2016; Kogan & Müller, 2003; Noelke, Gebel, & Kogan, 2012) compared to their less-educated counterparts. Higher-educated labor market entrants are also more likely to attain objective and subjective forms of career success than lesser-educated young adults. For example, they are more often employed in jobs matching their educational qualifications (Groot & Van Den Brink, 2000; Wolbers, 2003), earn significantly more (Ng, Eby, Sorensen, & Feldman, 2005; Van der Velden & Wolbers, 2007), are more likely to be promoted (Ng et al., 2005), and experience higher levels of work-related well-being and health than lesser-educated labor market entrants (Akkermans, Brenninkmeijer, Van den Bossche, Blonk, & Schaufeli, 2013b; Creed, Patton, & Hood, 2010).

Furthermore, the higher the attained level of education is, the more favorable the career prospects continue to be, both at the time of labor market

entry as well as in young adults' early careers. Research has indicated that the upward trend in temporary employment at the expense of permanent employment is weaker for higher-educated youth than for lower-educated youth (De Lange et al., 2012). Also, of those young adults who start their careers in temporary or nonoptimal employment, higher-educated labor market entrants are more capable of improving their position with each employer change and are faster in recovering from initial job mismatches (Schmelzer, 2011).

In contrast, lesser educated labor market entrants are hit particularly hard by the detrimental effects of flexible employment and unemployment in the early career. Research has shown that these labor market entrants more often return to unemployment after accepting a job (Ferrall, 1997; Schmelzer, 2011) and have a higher risk of becoming long-term unemployed after a spell of unemployment early in their careers (Eurostat, 2013, 2016; Ling & O'Brien, 2013; Yates, 2005). Yet, although initial negative consequences of precarious employment at labor market entry can have persistent negative effects, these effects do not differ between lower- and higher-educated school-leavers and often diminish during the early career (De Lange, Gesthuizen, & Wolbers, 2012; Skans, 2011).

To conclude so far, young adults with fewer educational credentials seem to encounter more challenges and difficulties in coping with the STWT compared to their higher-educated counterparts. However, considering these groups as homogeneous is not a fully accurate representation of reality, as research has also demonstrated differences *within* these educational groups.

Differences Within Educational Levels

Studies investigating differences within educational levels have shown that although lower-educated young adults appear to encounter more difficulties during the STWT, their lower educational credentials do not necessarily lead to a less adaptive STWT in the end. In particular, previous research has demonstrated that, within categories of educational groups, certain skills are more important than others for young adults who are starting their career. For example, in the German vocational education and training system, employers often prefer noncognitive skills (e.g., work attitude, motivation) over cognitive skills (e.g., grades) when selecting apprenticeship candidates among students with an intermediate-level school attainment (Protsch & Solga, 2015; Solga & Kohlrausch, 2013). In line with these findings, several scholars have proposed that training noncognitive skills—frequently referred to as “soft

skills”—may provide opportunities to improve the situation of young individuals in the labor market. Indeed, career-related interventions aimed at developing noncognitive skills, such as career competencies and career adaptability, have raised young adults’ chances to have a more adaptive STWT in terms of employability, career development, and well-being (Akkermans et al., 2015a; Koen et al., 2012; Koivisto, Vuori, & Nykyri, 2007).

Unfortunately, research on differences within educational levels in the STWT is still relatively scarce and this makes it difficult to draw strong conclusions for educational systems across the globe. In addition, employers react to educational credentials differently due to variation in institutional contexts across countries (Di Stasio & Van de Werfhorst, 2016) and to vocational characteristics such as field of education and industry (De Lange et al., 2012). A recent study by Middeldorp, Edzes, and Van Dijk (2018), for example, demonstrates that young people are more likely to have an adaptive STWT if they graduate with a vocational degree compared to a general degree. Specifically, young people with general education tend to obtain lower starting wages and more often end up in trajectories dominated by non-standard employment, unemployment, and inactivity. However, this effect is not persistent, as young people with a general degree catch up within two to five years and are paid similar or better wages than those with a vocational degree. This suggests that, depending on the perspective one takes (i.e., between or within educational levels), other factors and mechanisms may play an important role. Therefore, it is crucial to further examine both differences between and within educational levels in the STWT.

In sum, we conclude that young adults with different educational backgrounds face various opportunities and challenges during the STWT. Although we know quite well that educational credentials are among the key determinants of an adaptive STWT, much less is known about the underlying factors causing these differences in the early career development of young adults with different educational backgrounds. We will elaborate on this later in this chapter when we present avenues for future research.

STWT in the New Career: Career Competencies and Employability

In the previous sections, we analyzed the STWT from the perspective of the contemporary career, discussing how both individual and structural factors might contribute to creating sustainable careers and how this may differ between and within educational groups. Now, we look forward and discuss two

constructs that we argue are crucial for young adults in attaining an adaptive STWT: career competencies and employability.

Career Competencies

Ever since the new career started to gain traction among scholars and practitioners, around the early 1990s, career competencies have been an important topic of study. Influential new career perspectives, such as the boundaryless career (e.g., DeFillippi & Arthur, 1994) and the protean career (e.g., Hall & Mirvis, 1995) examined which competencies would be especially important in managing contemporary careers. Recently, Akkermans, Brenninkmeijer, Huibers, and Blonk (2013a) reviewed the available literature on career competencies and presented an integrated framework, which was specifically designed in the context of young adults and the STWT. They defined career competencies as “knowledge, skills, and abilities central to career development, which can be influenced and developed by the individual” (p. 249). Specifically, they synthesized four perspectives on career competencies: (a) the three ways of knowing (e.g., Eby, Butts, & Lockwood, 2003), (b) career metacompetencies (e.g., Briscoe & Hall, 2006), (c) career self-management (e.g., De Vos et al., 2009), and (d) the human capital perspective (e.g., Kuijpers, Schyns, & Scheerens, 2006). Based on these perspectives, they argued that young adults would especially need three types of career competencies: *reflective career competencies*, *communicative career competencies*, and *behavioral career competencies*.

Each of these three dimensions consists of two specific career competencies. The first reflective career competency is *reflection on motivation*: reflection on values, passions, and motivations about one’s career. The second one is *reflection on qualities*, which refers to reflection on strengths, shortcomings, and skills in relation to one’s career. Next, the first communicative career competency is *networking*, which focuses on the awareness of the presence and professional value of one’s network. It also relates to the ability to expand this network for career-related purposes. *Self-profiling* is the second communicative competency, and it entails presenting and communicating personal knowledge, abilities, and skills to the internal and external labor market. Finally, the first behavioral career competency is *work exploration*, which is actively exploring and searching for work-related and career-related opportunities on the internal and external labor market. The second one is *career control*, which focuses on actively influencing learning and work processes related to one’s career by setting goals and planning how to reach them.

Research has convincingly shown that developing career competencies in today's career has many benefits for employees. For example, career competencies can enhance career satisfaction (Eby et al., 2003), career success (Kuijpers et al., 2006), and vocational adjustment (King, 2004). Moreover, recent studies have elucidated that career competencies are important for young adults during their early career. For example, Akkermans, Paradniké, Van der Heijden, and De Vos (2018) showed that career competencies could enhance students' study engagement, well-being, and academic performance. Furthermore, Akkermans, Schaufeli, Brenninkmeijer, and Blonk (2013c) demonstrated that career competencies can interact with job resources to enhance work engagement. Specifically, career competencies and job resources interacted to enhance young workers' engagement at work. Similarly, young workers can benefit from developing career competencies because these can enhance their problem-solving skills, self-efficacy, and employability (Akkermans et al., 2015a) and are positively related to employee well-being in terms of job satisfaction and health (Plomp, Tims, Akkermans, Khapova, Jansen, & Bakker, 2016) and work engagement (Tims & Akkermans, 2017). Finally, Akkermans and Tims (2017) showed that career competencies can help young workers to proactively craft their jobs and enhance career success in terms of employability and work-home interaction. For instance, young workers who are better at reflecting on their skills and motivation, are more likely to proactively enhance their job resources, and are ultimately experience higher levels of career success.

Taken together, it is clear that career competencies are an important means for young adults to successfully navigate their early careers. Both during and after their studies (cf. Akkermans et al., 2015a), career competencies are a crucial building block for organizing and shaping their work and career. Given the current turbulent labor market, young adults need to be actively supported and encouraged in developing these competencies, thereby allowing them to adaptively transition into the labor market and successfully build their employability.

Employability

Whereas career competencies form an important *input* for young workers' careers (i.e., developing these competencies may benefit them in all kinds of ways), a crucial *outcome* of these would be employability. Traditionally, careers were linear and predictable. However, given the major changes that we described at the beginning of this chapter, traditional outcomes such as

“lifetime employment” are in many cases no longer the norm. Rather, for young adults it is important to become and remain employable; that is, they are expected to develop the necessary competencies required to be able to obtain and retain employment, both on the internal and external labor market (Dacre Pool & Sewell, 2007; Vanhercke, De Cuyper, Peeters, & De Witte, 2014; Van der Heijde & Van der Heijden, 2006).

Although employability research originates from around the 1950s, there has recently been a resurgence of this topic within the context of the new career. Several perspectives on employability exist, of which the three most well-known are the dispositional perspective (e.g., Fugate, Kinicki, & Ashforth, 2004), the competence-based perspective (e.g., Van der Heijde & Van der Heijden, 2006), and the perceived employability perspective (e.g., Vanhercke et al., 2014). The dispositional and competence-based perspectives both describe certain abilities and competencies that identify to what degree a person is employable (e.g., adaptability, expertise), whereas the perceived employability perspective mainly emphasizes worker’s own perceptions of their—internal and external—employability.

Despite these differences, the three perspectives share the notion that today’s employees need to ensure they can obtain and retain employment when necessary and desired. For example, the competence-based perspective would argue that individuals need to develop occupational expertise and the ability to adapt to changes, whereas the perceived employability perspective would dictate that a person can differ in their perceptions of opportunities for employment both with their current employer and on the external labor market. Recently, Forrier, Verbruggen, and De Cuyper (2015) presented a dynamic model in which these different notions of employability are integrated. Specifically, they hypothesized that *movement capital* (i.e., integrating the dispositional and competence-based perspectives) forms an input for perceived employability. That is, when employees develop certain skills and abilities—such as adaptability, resilience, and expertise—they might subsequently perceive themselves to be more employable. These perceptions of employability would subsequently enhance individual career outcomes and mobility.

This renewed emphasis on employability is an important development for attaining adaptive STWTs. Given our earlier reasoning that career competencies are crucial for young adults to adaptively transition to the labor market in today’s dynamic career landscape, it makes sense that employability would be an indicator of early career success (cf. Akkermans & Tims, 2017). Contrary to the traditional career notion, where students would graduate and then be employed for life within a single organization, they now need to ensure that they can be flexible when necessary and desired. In other words, already

during emerging adulthood, it is essential for young adults to constantly be aware of their employability and to strive to enhance it.

Indeed, research has convincingly shown that employability is an important phenomenon for thriving in today's career. For example, becoming and remaining employable can lead individuals to be more healthy (Berntson & Marklund, 2007), perform better (De Cuyper & De Witte, 2011), experience less job insecurity (De Cuyper, Mäkikangas, Kinnunen, Mauno, & De Witte, 2012), better cope with organizational changes (Fugate & Kinicki, 2008), and achieve higher levels of career success (De Vos, De Hauw, & Van der Heijden, 2011) and workplace learning (Van der Heijden, Gorgievski, & De Lange, 2016). Given the relevance of these issues for young adults entering the labor market—they have to learn, deal with changes, cope with uncertainty, and maintain their health, performance, and career success—we underline the importance of employability enhancement for young adults going through the STWT.

However, it should be noted that there are also risks associated with this emphasis on employability. Related to our earlier discussions of career sustainability and differences between and within educational groups, there might be unequal opportunities among young people for becoming employable. In this regard, the earlier mentioned Matthew effect might come into play: It is conceivable that those young people who already have many resources (e.g., good grades, family support, competencies) are the ones who can be agentic and achieve career success, whereas the ones without such resources might lack the necessary tools to be agentic, thereby risking the loss of even more resources and potentially ending up in a nonadaptive STWT (cf. Forrier, De Cuyper, & Akkermans, 2018).

Taken together, when analyzing the STWT using a contemporary career perspective, we should take into particular account the development of career competencies and employability. The former seems especially applicable for young adults to enable them to navigate their early career, and the latter will provide them with a strong position on the labor market and a foundation for sustainable employment with high levels of person–career fit.

Looking Forward: What's Next?

In this chapter, we have analyzed the STWT from the perspective of the contemporary career. Among other things, we reflected on sustainable careers as a valuable framework for STWT, we zoomed in on educational differences, and we argued that career competencies and employability are crucial phenomena

in today's STWT. In this final section, we will look forward and discuss several potentially fruitful avenues for future research.

The first suggestion we would like to make is for research on STWT in the contemporary career to integrate individual-level, organizational-level, and societal factors that impact this crucial transition. Most research thus far has taken a monodisciplinary view on the STWT, thereby adopting an either/or approach. We urge scholars to aim for more integration between these domains, as the STWT is an incredibly complex process during which many factors can play an important role. For example, when examining the predictive role of individual factors such as motivation, skills, and abilities in an adaptive STWT, it would also be crucial to look at factors such as actual job availability and institutional support. Similarly, when examining the STWT from a more sociological perspective, researchers would need to include micro-level factors such as individual perceptions of employability. Integrating disciplines is especially important because the labor market has rapidly changed, and these changes might significantly impact the STWT, for example, because of new ways of organizing work, new demands on individuals, and general trends in society. In all, we argue that a true understanding of the STWT in today's complex career landscape can only be obtained when studying it from an *interdisciplinary* perspective. A good first step to achieve this would be to systematically integrate the available literature on the STWT from different disciplines. Once this has been done, the overview that is created can serve as a foundation for future interdisciplinary research on the STWT.

Second, as a concrete example of crossing disciplines, current research on adaptive STWTs could focus more on integrating knowledge from the careers literature and human resource management literature with available knowledge from health and clinical psychology literature. Recently, the media have been presenting shocking statistics on students and young workers dropping out due to stress and burnout (see, e.g., "Companies Are Facing," 2018; "Burnout Is Everywhere," 2013; "How Burnout Became a Sinister," 2018) as a consequence of the major demands they are facing during their early career. From a career and human resource management perspective, there is a lot of available knowledge about the challenges young adults face during and after the STWT. However, a thorough understanding of the consequences of these challenges for their mental and health and well-being is still lacking. Therefore, it would be a valuable addition to existing knowledge on the STWT if future research could include theories and models—such as back-to-work integration programs—from health psychology to obtain a firmer grasp on the crucial factors that determine which young workers thrive and which of

them do not survive. Subsequently, this improved understanding would be input for interventions and career counseling aimed at supporting emerging adults.

Our third suggestion would be to initiate more research on adaptive STWT processes in different contexts. As an example, it would be valuable to study vulnerable and disadvantaged groups. Most research thus far has looked at STWT as a general process that is equally applicable to all young adults. However, given recent developments, it would be likely that attaining an adaptive STWT would be fundamentally different for certain groups. For example, young adults with disabilities face truly different challenges compared to those who are relatively healthy (see, e.g., Dean et al., 2019). As an illustration, the increasingly dynamic and flexible world of work as we have described it in this chapter might be especially difficult to successfully enter for young adults with autism spectrum disorder, who face additional barriers, and who have unique needs when starting their careers (see e.g., Griffiths, Giannantonio, Hurley-Hanson, & Cardinal, 2016). Similarly, immigrants entering new labor markets will also face significantly different challenges when attempting to find their first jobs (Protsch & Solga, 2017). In both examples, there will be additional personal challenges and contextual factors that impact the STWT process. Another related trend is the increase of entrepreneurship and self-employed workers. In many countries, their numbers are dramatically increasing. It is likely that persons who become self-employed after graduation face a different STWT process compared to those who enter working organizations and obtain employment there (see, e.g., Rummel et al., 2019). For instance, they might need to be even more proactive, and their networking and profiling skills could be especially important. Taken together, we would suggest that future research examines adaptive STWTs not just from a general perspective but also from specific perspectives on certain groups.

Finally, we would suggest that future research on the STWT examines unexpected events that impact early career development. The vast majority of recent career and STWT literature has focused on individual agency and on the importance of being proactive, that is, how young adults can control their own career success. While we certainly support this notion, we also stress the importance of researching so-called *career shocks*, which are disruptive and extraordinary events that are, at least to some degree, caused by factors outside the focal individual's control and that trigger a deliberate thought process concerning one's career (Akkermans et al., 2018). Such shocks can be negative (e.g., getting rejected at a major job opening after graduation) or positive (e.g., receiving an unexpected job offer). For example, Blokker et al. (2019) recently showed that the interaction between individual agency (i.e., development

of career competencies) and contextual factors (i.e., career shocks) plays an important role in young professionals' immediate (i.e., career satisfaction) and long-term career success (i.e., employability). Specifically, negative career shocks undermined young professionals' efforts to build their employability, whereas positive shocks strengthened this relationship. Yet, we still have a very limited understanding of the impact of career shocks on the STWT and sustainable career development of young adults, and we therefore urge scholars to perform more research in this area.

In conclusion, in this chapter we have examined the STWT from a sustainable careers perspective and argued that an adaptive STWT is crucial as a building block for long-term sustainability of careers. We showed that the STWT has become more challenging for young adults and we underlined how individual agency and structural factors can interact to lay an early foundation for sustainable career development. In particular, career competencies and employability were highlighted as crucial concepts for today's STWT. Finally, we discussed potentially interesting research areas for future research to further our understanding of the contemporary STWT.

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