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## **Managing a sustainable career in the contemporary world of work: personal choices and contextual challenges**

Darouei, M.

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**Author:** Darouei, M.

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## Summary

Managing a sustainable career in the contemporary world of work: Personal choices and contextual challenges

More than one-third of our lifetime is dedicated to work. Considering that work plays such a prominent role in our lives, many of us are concerned about making the right career decisions and choosing career paths that can make us happy and successful, and thus are sustainable. This concern is especially salient in the contemporary world of work where we have an endless number of career paths to follow. However, as much as we want to, sustainable careers cannot be crafted by simply making the right career decisions. Our careers are continuously affected by less controllable aspects originating from various contexts. Think, for instance, of the influence of societal changes, the organization we work for or our family members on our careers. Hence, it is important to examine how the person together with other contextual stakeholders can influence sustainable careers. In this dissertation, I undertake four empirical studies that shed light on how *personal choices* and *contextual challenges* impact sustainable careers.

The first empirical chapter takes a *person-centred* approach and examines how an individual's choice to engage in self-employment impacts the sustainability of their career. Using 15 years of data, this study compares the career sustainability of those who decide to engage in self-employment with that of wage workers. Here, career sustainability is conceptualized in terms of health. The findings indicate that, because of their greater schedule flexibility, the self-employed experience greater health levels and their health status shows less variability over time. Together, these results suggest that the self-employed are better equipped to build a sustainable career over time and that if we are to better understand what makes careers sustainable it is imperative to compare contemporary and traditional employment relations.

Chapter 3 also sheds light on the *person* and reports on a study that focuses on employees' decision to work from home. However, while Chapter 2 examines how individuals' choices affect their career on the long-term, Chapter 3 employs experience sampling methodology to investigate how daily career decisions, in terms of working from home or at the office, affect individuals' sustainability every day. A total of 34 professional workers filled out three daily surveys for two consecutive weeks. Our results show that on days when employees work from home they experience less time pressure, and less conflict between the work and home domain, leading to greater levels of work-related well-being the next morning. These findings suggest that individuals' daily decision to work from home can foster sustainable careers.

While Chapter 3 sheds light on the consequences of the working from home practice for health, Chapter 4 explores how the practice relates to perceived performance ratings. In doing so, this chapter builds on Chapter 3 by investigating the interplay between the person and the context. This study explores how contextual players, such as supervisors, respond to individuals' decision to work from home. Results from two experimental vignette studies among 149 university students and 320 supervisors indicate that employees who decide to work from home regularly, receive lower performance ratings because supervisors perceive their work centrality and organizational commitment as lower. Moreover, the findings show that this is particularly so for employees without children who work from home. This study contributes to the career sustainability literature by investigating the role of supervisors on individuals' career sustainability and by showing that the path towards a sustainable career differs across parents and non-parents.

Similar to Chapter 4, Chapter 5 looks at the interplay between the *person* and the *context*. This study investigates how women respond to societal norms and external barriers (e.g., lack of promotional opportunities) in terms of accepting a risky leadership position. In two experimental vignettes, 119 university students and 109 professional workers were offered a leadership position in either a company in decline or a successful company. The findings of this empirical chapter show that women with low career self-efficacy are more likely to accept a risky leadership position, because they perceive the job as a promotional opportunity. Accepting a glass cliff position might jeopardize women's path towards a sustainable career, because risky leadership appointments decrease the chance of attaining leadership jobs in the future. This empirical study shows that the path towards a sustainable career is different across social groups because of contextual challenges, but it also indicates that the person plays an active role. That is, while societal norms can create challenges for women's careers, personal resources, such as career self-efficacy, can help women to remain persistent in their career goals (i.e., step away from a risky leadership position).

In sum, my dissertation provides an understanding of what makes careers more or less sustainable. Based on the findings of my dissertation it can be concluded that contemporary work forms, such as working from home, have the potential to promote sustainable careers but only if supervisors support individuals' decisions. Hence, it is imperative that future research on sustainable careers investigates how both individuals and their surrounding stakeholders can impact the sustainability of careers. Moreover, my results emphasize the need of taking a diversity perspective to sustainable careers as some individuals, such as non-parents and women, may face greater challenges in crafting a sustainable career. All in all, the findings of my dissertation are of value to individuals who are concerned with managing a sustainable career and to organizations and policy-makers facing the challenge of promoting career sustainability.