


Chapter 5

The Interplay Between Career Adaptability and Foreign Language Skills in an Unstable Labor Market


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ABSTRACT

Career adaptability is a soft skill that allows people to cope with professional tasks in an unpredictable labor market. Today's global labor market also requires language skills to facilitate employees' collaboration across linguistic boundaries. The chapter is built around a quantitative study with participants from a large public university in the south-eastern part of Central Europe, and it aims to analyze the connection between career adaptability, foreign languages, and personal traits. The results show significant gender differences regarding adaptability and the perceived role of foreign languages for employability and in one's career development, all in favor of girls. Concerning students' status as employed/unemployed, the tendencies regard only unemployed students' stronger confidence in and lower concern with the future. Career adaptability is predicted by foreign language anxiety, conscientiousness, openness to experience, and self-perceived FL proficiency. Some implications for teachers are presented at the end of the chapter.

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INTRODUCTION

European statistics and institutional reports have shown an increase in the employment rate for recent graduates of tertiary education compared to pre-pandemic times, especially for male graduates, but they have also pointed to a shortage of skills in the labor market (European Commission [EC], 2023a; EC, 2023b). Hard skills continue to be important in employment, but soft skills are constantly gaining prominence for employability, work performance, and advancement (LaPrade et al., 2019).

Soft skills, such as adaptability, critical and analytical thinking, teamwork, time management, the ability to cooperate and communicate, computer skills, as well as foreign languages (FLs), have the advantage of being transferrable from one field to another, facilitating performance in social contexts, and benefiting one's professional life at large (Poláková et al., 2023). The importance of these skills has emerged more forcefully recently, as work, traditionally seen as a stable environment for individuals' maturation, has become a dynamic and unpredictable environment that forces people to adapt to new working environments (Fusco et al., 2019). Consequently, young people are far from the comfort and security that they should enjoy once they finish higher education (HE) and get a job (Savickas, 2013). The COVID-19 pandemic and the recent international conflicts have added even more challenges and distress to the existing uncertainty in the job market (International Labour Organization, 2022).

Career adaptability, a part of the individuals' psychological capital, has been indicated as a key resource for coping with present and anticipated professional tasks and job-related transitions and difficulties, underlying professional success at both corporate and individual levels (Savickas, 2005; Savickas & Porfeli, 2012). Given that the mission of HE is to prepare young people for the labor market and global challenges (Guichard, 2018), career adaptability should be one of the soft skills to be considered for development during university studies.

Another soft skill that is particularly valued in the labor market nowadays is the ability to effectively communicate in foreign languages (LaPrade et al., 2019). In this respect, meaningful communicative competence in FLs in addition to one's mother tongue has become a desideratum at the European Union (EU) level and a requirement in the labor market (Commission of the European Communities, 2003). Across the EU member states and the United Kingdom, over 10% of the vacancies that were posted online in 2021 explicitly demanded language skills (Marconi et al., 2023). FL skills are necessary for various positions in the labor market, but especially for those involving complex cognitive tasks (Marconi et al., 2023). They are considered a driving force for graduate employability, career growth, labor force mobility, and immigration, but also for interpersonal communication and student education and mobility (Badescu et al., 2019; British Academy, 2020; Council of Europe, 2003; EC, 2017; Shepperd, 2021).

At the EU level, FLs are part of the students' curriculum from primary education or even kindergarten to higher education, where they are taught at different proficiency levels, either as mandatory or elective courses (Kortmann, 2019; Maican, 2019). At present, statistics show that 73.3% of young European adults (aged 25–34) have a command of at least one FL, with about 30% of them knowing their best-known FL at a proficient level and another 30% at a good level. Individuals with a tertiary level of education, employed, and with a higher labor market status have a higher language proficiency level (EC, 2019).

Given the above, the authors consider that bringing the two soft skills, i.e., career adaptability and FL skills, into the same research area may reveal new insights into the mutual influences between HE, students' socio-economic environment, and their individual characteristics. It may also contribute to a better understanding of the role these skills have in the undergraduates' future professional lives.

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