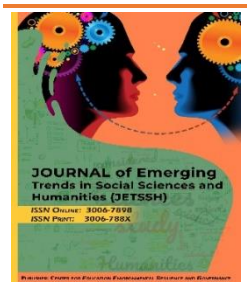
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Determinants of Sustainable Employability: A Systematic Literature Review

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ABSTRACT

Sustainable employability (SE) has become an important concern for organizations, policymakers and researchers. This is due to demographic shifts, technological transformation, and evolving labor market conditions. However, the literature remains fragmented with inconsistent conceptual definitions and a lack of holistic synthesis of determinants across multiple levels. This study aims to systematically synthesize the existing definitions of sustainable employability, identify its key determinants, and categorize these determinants into personal, social and organizational/contextual factors. A systematic search was conducted in Scopus, Science Direct and Taylor & Francis databases up to January 2026. Following PRISMA guidelines, 1759 records were screened and 13 peer-reviewed studies met the inclusion criteria. Quality appraisal was performed using the Mixed Method Appraisal Tool (MMAT). The extracted data were analyzed using thematic synthesis. Three conceptual clusters emerged: the capability approach, able and willingness framework, and three domain models (health, well-being, and employability). Key determinants were grouped into personal, social and organizational/contextual factors. This review advances the SE literature by integrating fragmented conceptualizations into a coherent multi-level framework. The findings provide a foundation for future theoretical development and evidence-based organizational interventions aimed at fostering sustainable employability.

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Introduction

In the era characterized by an ageing workforce, rising retirement ages and rapid technological and organizational change, the concept of employability has evolved (Low & Pok, 2025). Traditionally, employability has been defined as an individual's ability to gain and maintain jobs (van Harten et al., 2020). However, people often consider this conventional perspective to just short-term job matching instead of long term employee's wellbeing. Whereas, sustainable employability has emerged as a more encompassing framework. It includes the conditions under which employees can remain productive, healthy and engaged throughout their working lives instead of mere job placement. Labor market conditions have made these issues more severe. There is a major decline in skilled workers compared to the pre-COVID time period (Abraham & Rendell, 2023). It has become very difficult for organizations to attract and retain human capital in a sustainable manner (Courchesne et al., 2024). Recently, these changes have started to put pressure on organizations to move away from traditional employability models to a more contemporary approach. This is in recognition of the fact that traditional employability models fail to cater to the complex dynamics of the modern workforce. Thus, a more sustainable and modern framework is the need of the hour. This modern approach caters to employees' motivation and ability to keep working. Sustainable employability (SE) is defined as "the extent to which workers are able and willing to remain working now and, in the future" (Van der Klink et al., 2016, p. 74).

To understand SE, organizations should move beyond the individual-level factors. There are a range of factors that shape workers' ability to sustain their employment. The Bioecological Model proposed by Bronfenbrenner provides a useful explanation for capturing how multiple factors influence an individual across different levels of their environment (Bronfenbrenner, 2013). Likewise, an individual's career is influenced by multiple factors. A growing body of research suggests that SE is shaped by a complex interplay of determinants operating at different levels (Llinares Insa et al., 2016). Consistent with the Bioecological Model, SE can be understood as the outcome of interaction among individual characteristics, interpersonal relationships and organizational practices, and broader contextual conditions. Prior literature often studies factors in isolation, either focusing on individual or organizational factors. This lack of a comprehensive perspective restricts a holistic understanding of how different factors affect sustainable employment (Fleuren et al., 2020). Despite a growing interest in SE, literature remains fragmented into two critical respects. First, there is no consensus on the conceptual definition of SE (Fleuren et al., 2016, 2020). Researchers have operationalized the construct in varying ways. Few researchers have focused on work ability and health. Some of them have focused on lifelong learning and flexibility, and still others prioritize motivation and vitality.

Furthermore, the determinants of SE have been investigated across multiple disciplines, but findings are dispersed and often contradictory due to inconsistent measurement and terminology (Van Harten et al., 2022). In particular, while it is broadly acknowledged that SE is shaped at multiple levels of influence, existing studies rarely synthesize these factors in an integrated manner (Rothwell et al., 2025). Consequently, the relative importance of personal, social and organizational/contextual determinants remains unclear. Therefore, it hinders both theoretical development and the design of practical interventions. Consequently, there remains a limited understanding regarding which determinants consistently influence SE and how these determinants interact across different levels. Given the conceptual ambiguity surrounding SE and the fragmented nature of existing evidence, a systematic synthesis is required to consolidate current knowledge and provide a coherent foundation for future research.

Research Questions*:*

RQ1: What are the different conceptual definitions of sustainable employability?

RQ 2: What are the key determinants of sustainable employability identified in the literature?

RQ3: How can these determinants be categorized into personal, organizational/ contextual levels?

Research Objectives*:*

1. To systematically identify, extract, and synthesize the different conceptual definitions of sustainable employability.
2. To systematically identify the determinants of Sustainable Employability.
3. To categorize these determinants into personal, social, and organizational/contextual levels.

Research Methodology

Research design

A reliable systematic review requires systematic planning and explicit documentation of the conducted protocol (Shamseer et al., 2015). Below illustrates the inclusion and exclusion criteria for the articles in Table 1. This study adopts a PRISMA-guided systematic literature review approach to synthesize conceptualizations and determinants of SE across quantitative and qualitative studies in Table 2.

Search Strategy

A systematic literature search was conducted across Scopus, Science Direct and Taylor & Francis to ensure coverage of high-quality peer-reviewed research in management, organizational behavior and career sustainability domains. These databases were selected due to their strong indexing of empirical and conceptual work in human resource management and organizational studies. Given the relative novelty and fragmentation of sustainable employability as a construct, this multiple database approach ensured adequate conceptual saturation while maintaining methodological feasibility. The search was conducted without temporal restriction to capture the full evolution of sustainable employability (SE) literature, as it is still in its infancy phase. To minimize selection bias, a multistage screening procedure was adopted, including duplicate removal, title and abstract. The selection guideline adheres to the PRISMA guidelines in Figure 1.

Search Query

The literature was searched systematically, and the following keywords were used:*("sustainable employability" OR "career sustainability" OR "long-term employability" OR "sustainable career" OR "sustainable work" OR "job sustainability").* The search was performed in Scopus, Taylor & Francis and Science Direct.

Criteria used to include and exclude the studies

Research examining the determinants of SE was deemed appropriate for inclusion in this systematic review. A language restriction was implemented, and only studies published in English were considered. However, no time limit was applied. Journal articles were deemed eligible for inclusion in this review. Moreover, a subject restriction was also placed and only the studies that come under the umbrella of social sciences, business, management and accounting and psychology were included. However, this study did not examine books, dissertations, and theses. Only studies in peer-reviewed journals were included as shown in Table 1. The population consisted of working individuals/ adults. Student-based employability studies were excluded. Similarly, studies on healthcare, marine workers, sports players and deck workers were not included. These occupational groups operate within a highly specialized work environment characterized by unique physical demands, regulatory frameworks, career structures and employment conditions that differ substantially from those of the general workforce. Including such populations can introduce contextual variability and may limit the comparison of findings across studies. This criterion was selected very carefully. It ensures that the review is aligned well with its objectives.

Study selection and extraction of data

The PRISMA diagram (Figure 1) shows the selection criteria in detail. It documents the screening procedure and reasons for excluding the studies from review. Following PRISMA guidelines an initial 1759 records from Scopus, Taylor & Francis and Science Direct were taken. After removing duplicates and database filters which included peer-reviewed journal articles only, English language, final publication stage

and relevant subject area a total of 181 articles remained. After this, titles and abstracts were screened as per the inclusion and exclusion criteria. As a result, a total of 164 records (141 from Scopus, 23 from Science Direct) were excluded. These studies were excluded because they were outside the population criteria and disciplinary requirements of the review. During full-text assessment, four articles were excluded because SE was not a central focus of the study and did not examine determinants relevant to the review objectives. Consequently, 13 studies satisfied all inclusion criteria and were included in the final synthesis.

Table 1: *Inclusion and exclusion criteria*

Criteria Type	Inclusion Criteria	Exclusion Criteria
Disciplinary Focus	Studies conducted within management sciences, HRM, organizational behavior, work psychology, or career sustainability domains.	Studies focusing on employees working in clinical, or rehabilitation contexts (e.g., occupational therapy, patient recovery, disability management, occupational health and safety), environment sustainability
Conceptual Focus	Studies examining the sustainable employability of working individuals.	Studies that address general employability, graduate employability, or job placement without a sustainability focus.
Population	Working individuals in organizational, corporate, (including public/private sector employees).	Students, patients, or participants in medical rehabilitation programs, Nurses, marine workers, and undergrad students.
Type of Study	Empirical (quantitative), qualitative, theoretical, or mixed method studies or studies published in peer-reviewed journals.	Non-academic papers, editorials, conference abstracts, book reviews, or grey literature, theses
Publication Type	Peer-reviewed journal articles published in English. Minimum Scopus-indexed journals	Non-English publications or sources without peer review.
Indexing		

Quality Appraisal

In a systematic literature review, a quality assessment of studies holds significant importance. It ensures that the studies included are methodologically sound (Shamseer et al., 2015). Quality appraisal was carried out using Mixed Method Appraisal Tool (MMAT) (Hong et al., 2018). It is designed for systematic reviews that incorporate qualitative, quantitative and mixed method studies. It is best suited for the multidisciplinary nature of sustainable employability research.

MMAT requires two independent reviewers to conduct the appraisal (Hong et al., 2018). Therefore, two independent reviewers with relevant expertise in organizational behavior, organizational studies and human resource management conducted the assessment of all the identified studies. Any disagreements were resolved through discussion until a consensus was reached. For the quality assessment of quantitative studies, the following criteria were used: 1) relevance of sampling strategy to research questions, 2) the sample representation

of the target population, 3) appropriate measures used, 4) the risk of response bias is low, and 5) appropriate statistical analysis to address research questions (Hong et al., 2018). Furthermore, for qualitative studies, quality was assessed on the given criteria: 1) appropriate qualitative approach, 2) effectiveness of data collection methodologies, 3) derivation of conclusion from the data, 4) validation of interpretation, 5) coherence linking data sources, collection methods, analysis and interpretation. For mixed-method studies, the following criteria was utilized: 1) an appropriate rationale for mixed-method studies, 2) proper integration of quantitative and qualitative elements, 3) sufficient interpretation of integrated outputs, 4) suitable resolution of discrepancies between results 5) complied with quality standards of each methodological approach.

Each study was assessed against five criteria specific to its methodological design, with responses recorded as "yes", "no or "Can't tell". As per MMAT, at least three criteria must be met (60%) to be included in the final synthesis as shown in Table 2.

Table 2: *Summary of Quality Assessment*

Sr. No	Author	Year	Design	QA1	QA2	QA3	QA4	QA5	Criteria Fulfilled	Decision
1	(Picco et al., 2024)	2024	Quantitative	✓	✓	✓	C	✓	4/5	✓ Include
2	(Courchesne et al., 2025)	2025	Mixed Methods	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	5/5	✓ Include
3	(Courchesne et al., 2024)	2024	Qualitative	✓	✓	✓	✓	C	4/5	✓ Include
4	(Egdell et al., 2023)	2023	Qualitative	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	5/5	✓ Include
5	(Shao et al., 2021)	2021	Quantitative	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	5/5	✓ Include
6	(Rhee et al., 2021)	2021	Quantitative	✓	✓	✓	C	✓	4/5	✓ Include
7	(den Boer et al., 2021)	2021	Qualitative	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	5/5	✓ Include
8	(Ybema et al., 2020)	2020	Quantitative	✓	✓	✓	C	✓	4/5	✓ Include
9	(Semeijn et al., 2019)	2019	Quantitative	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	5/5	✓ Include
10	(Fleuren et al., 2024)	2024	Quantitative	✓	C	✓	C	✓	3/5	✓ Include
11	(Gürbüz et al., 2022)	2022	Quantitative	✓	✓	✓	C	✓	4/5	✓ Include

12	(Ritchie et al., 2022)	2022	Qualitative	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	5/5	✓ Include
13	(Neupane et al., 2022)	2022	Quantitative	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	5/5	✓ Include

Table 3: *Conceptual Definitions*

Author	Definition of Sustainable Employability	Key Emphasis
(Picco et al., 2024)	SE is a comprehensive collection of capabilities that allows an employee to make valuable and health-sustaining contributions across the course of their working life. Workers should have real opportunities to contribute in the present as well as in the future while protecting health and welfare.	Capability approach, valuable work, health, productivity, long-term perspective
(Courchesne et al., 2025)	Sustainable employability means ability to maintain a meaningful work contribution over the course of working life. It encompasses perceived employability, vitality and work ability.	Long-term work participation, employability, vitality, work ability
(Courchesne et al., 2024)	SE means the degree to which workers possess both the ability and willingness to continue working both at present and in the longer run and is shaped by worker-environment interaction.	Ability to work, willingness to work, future orientation, worker-environment interaction
(Egdell et al., 2023)	SE denotes that workers over the course of their working lives can realize tangible opportunities in the form of capabilities. They must have access to the required to contribute meaningfully through work at present and in the future while protecting their health and welfare. Realizing this depends on a supportive work environment and the attitude and motivation to exploit these opportunities.	Capability approach, opportunities, valuable contribution, health, welfare, motivation, supportive context, lifelong perspective
(Shao et al., 2021)	SE is founded on the idea that continuous learning and skill development result in improved performance in the context of continuous change and uncertainty. It indicates dynamic self-improvement and the capability for employment over the long term.	Continuous learning, skill development, adaptability, dynamic capability, performance, long-term employment
Rhee (Rhee et al., 2021)	At the organizational level, SE reflect how well a company can create long-term, healthy and conducive work environment. It is achieved by giving employees a sustainable working	Organizational responsibility, healthy work, happy work, long-term employment, sustainable work environment

	environment.	
(den Boer et al., 2021)	SE is conceptualized as the capacity to remain engaged in work and sustain job satisfaction achieved through enhanced vitality and work ability especially among older workers.	Vitality, work ability, job satisfaction, continued employment, older workers, job design
(Ybema et al., 2020)	SE refers to the extent to which workers possess both the ability and willingness to continue working now and in the future. It is reflected through employability, work motivation, and health.	Ability to work, willingness to work, future employment, employability, motivation, health
(Semeijn et al., 2019)	SE refers to the individual's possibilities and capabilities to continue to work and further develop in one's work, while staying happy (vital) and healthy (workable).	vitality and workability
(Fleuren et al., 2020)	SE pertains to long-term ability to perform effectively both within their current work roles and in the labor market.	Long-term work ability, functioning at work, labor market participation, employability continuity, career sustainability
(Gürbüz et al., 2022)	SE is defined as follows: "Throughout their working lives, workers can realize tangible opportunities in the form of a set of capabilities. They also enjoy the necessary conditions that allow them to make a valuable contribution through their work, now and in the future, while safeguarding their health and welfare. This requires, on the one hand, a work context that facilitates them, and on the other hand, the attitude and motivation to exploit these opportunities."	Capability approach, opportunities, valuable contribution, long-term working life, health, welfare, supportive work context, motivation, future employability
(Ritchie et al., 2022)	Over the course of their working lives, individuals are able to access tangible opportunities articulated as a set of capabilities. They further benefit from enabling conditions that permit a valuable contribution to work in both the present and in longer term while safeguarding health and welfare. This depends on the work context that actively supports these outcomes and on worker's own attitudes and motivation to seize the opportunities.	Capability approach, tangible opportunities, lifelong employability, valuable contribution, present and future work, health, welfare, supportive work context, motivation, employee agency
(Neupane et al., 2022)	SE is a multidimensional individual-level construct covering health, well-being, and employability domains, with a temporal component (sustainability measured over time).	sustainable work; employment; well-being; older workers; aging

Data Extraction

Having established the conceptual landscape, we now turn to RQ2 and RQ3: the key determinants of SE and their categorization into personal, social and organizational factors. The results from 13 articles were summarized in a tabular form in Table 4. It provides the list of authors, article titles, year of publication, population, sample size, study design, data analysis methods, instruments utilized, and outcomes.

Table 4: *Summary of selected articles*

Sr	Authors	*Title*	Year	Country	Population	Instrument Used	Key Findings
1	(Picco et al., 2024)	*Italian Entertainment Professionals' Sustainable Employability: What Factors to Consider? A Network Analysis*	2024	Italy	123 Italian entertainment professionals	Online survey, network analysis, Capability Index (CI), WHBq, MWMS, Business Scan	Within the SE network, organizational level conversion factors (SE and social policies) were more predictive than personal factors like intrinsic motivation. Valuable work capabilities were central in the SE network. Personal and contextual factors related directly to employability regarding opportunities for valuable, healthy work.
2	(Courchesne et al., 2025)	*Fostering sustainable employability in interorganizational networks: which activities and conditions pay off?*	2025	Netherlands	80 workers from interorganizational networks (quantitative), 7 interviewees (qualitative)	Mixed methods: survey (cross-sectional), semi-structured interviews	Taking part in network activities (personal/career development) was positively linked to work ability and perceived employability. The relationship between personal development activities and work ability was moderated by LMX. Vitality was not significantly affected. Taking part in network activities can benefit both the organization and its workers by facilitating SE.
3	(Courchesne et al., 2024)	*New ways of fostering sustainable employability in inter-organizational networks: an explorative study to understand the factors and mechanisms for their success*	2024	Netherlands	18 network coordinators, 14 HR professionals (focus groups)	Qualitative: focus groups, open coding, thematic analysis	Three categories of success factors/mechanisms were identified: environmental (labor market challenges), structural (flat structure, shared activities, roles), and interpersonal (trust, communication, reciprocity, shared vision). The study highlighted environmental, structural and interpersonal factors and mechanisms driving the success of inter organizational networks focused on SE. Environmental factors included labor market challenges. Structural factors comprised a network's flat structure, the absence of informal roles, the allocation of roles and expectations for stakeholders and shared network opportunities. Interpersonal factors and

							mechanisms encompassed communication among stakeholders, the establishment of reciprocity, interaction and collaboration between stakeholders, the valuing of trust, a convivial culture and shared values among stakeholders.
4	(Egdell et al., 2023)	*'I Find It Daunting . . . That I'm Gonna Have to Deal with This until 60': Extended Working Lives and the Sustainable Employability of Operational Firefighters*	2023	United Kingdom	Operational firefighters, crew managers, watch managers (n=99)	Semi-structured qualitative interviews (group and one-to-one)	Physical and emotional demands, organizational pressures (e.g., redeployment, under-resourcing), and lack of protected time for fitness threaten sustainable extended working lives. Commitment to the role remains high but is strained by systemic challenges. Individuals are able and often willing to extend their working lives. The factors that shape this capacity reflect an interplay of state, organizational and individual influences on the ability and willingness to extend working lives.
5	(Shao et al., 2021)	*Digital Divide or Digital Welfare? The Role of the Internet in Shaping the Sustainable Employability of Chinese Adults*	2021	China	Chinese adults aged 16–60 (from China Family Panel Studies 2010–2018)	Panel double-hurdle model, CFPS survey, Principal Component Analysis, Instrumental Variable (county-level internet penetration)	Internet use significantly enhances sustainable employability, especially for middle-aged/older adults, freelancers, and rural residents. The internet narrows the digital gap (information welfare effect). Workplace computerization strengthens this effect. Positive association driven by higher skill requirements, continuous learning, and better labor market adaptability. Rural and younger cohorts (16–39) benefit more than urban residents. Informal and foreign-owned enterprises show stronger gains than state-owned enterprises. Expanding portable and affordable internet access can foster economic inclusion by removing barriers to information and enhancing the skills required to participate in the future workforce.
6	(Rhee et al., 2021)	*Corporate Social Responsibility and Sustainable Employability: Empirical Evidence from Korea*	2021	Korea	Korean listed firms (2012–2017; 3,802 firm-year observations)	Regression analysis, KEJI CSR Index, KisValue & TS2000 databases	Firms engaging in CSR activities show higher SE. CSR activities foster better working environments, increase regular employment, and support long-term labor sustainability.

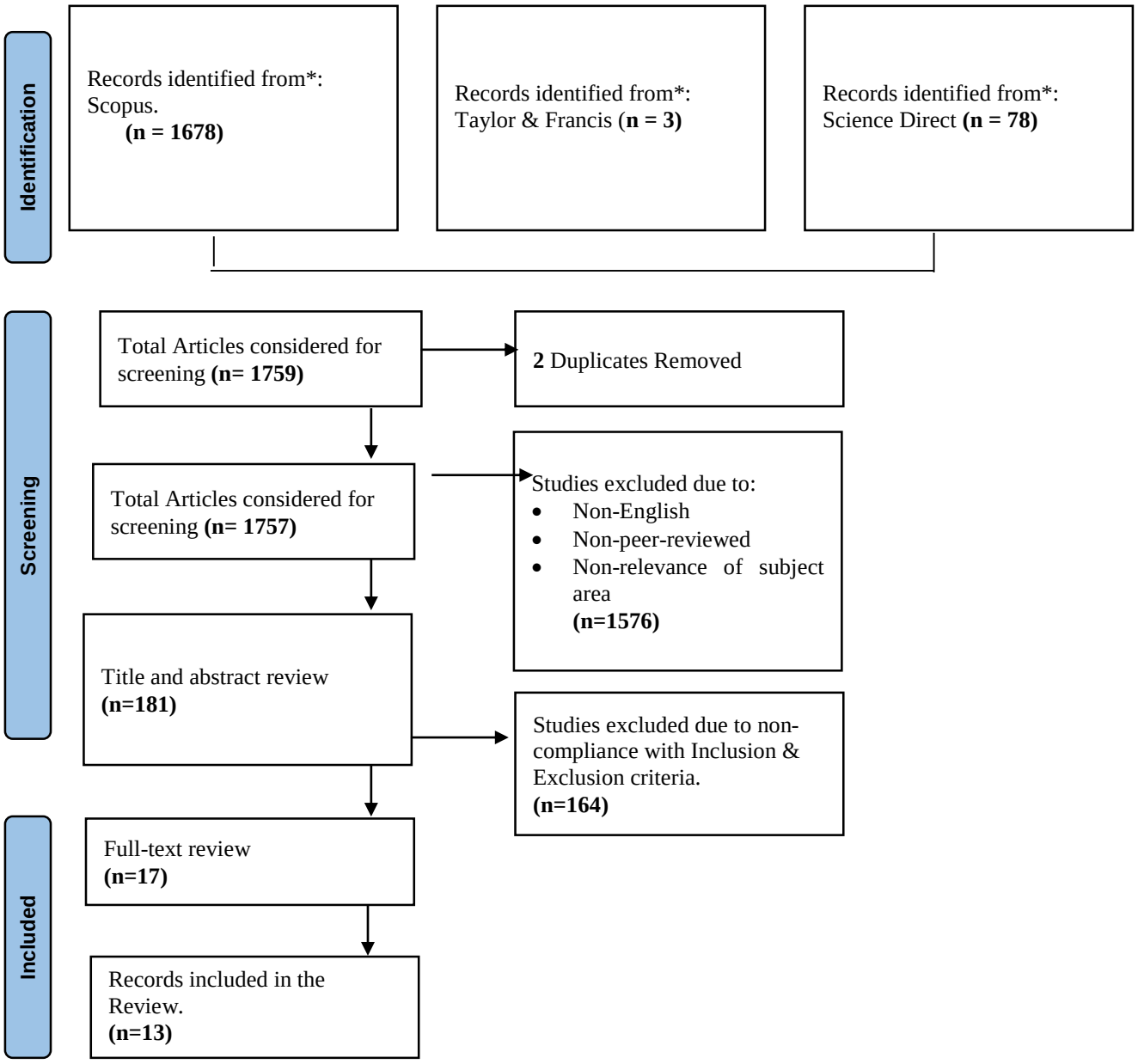
7	(den Boer et al., 2021)	*Job Design to Extend Working Time: Work Characteristics to Enable Sustainable Employment of Older Employees in Different Job Types*	2021	Netherlands	Older employees (55+) (operational, professional, managerial roles)	Semi-structured interviews based on the Work Design Questionnaire (WDQ)	Job types share some work characteristics (e.g., autonomy, client interaction, mentorship), but also have unique needs: operational roles need supervisory support and a conducive space; individuals need expertise use and flexible timings; managers value personal development and colleague contact. Tailoring job design to job type can support SE and extended work participation. Six characteristics were reported by participants, namely autonomy, use of expertise and knowledge, focus on key tasks and tasks adjustments, challenges in work content, personal development opportunities and psychological workload. Social work characteristics (work relationships, interaction between employers and employees. social characteristics comprised cooperation with colleagues and teamwork, a mentoring role, supervisor support and interaction with clients. Contextual work characteristics included the workspace and working conditions.
8	(Ybema et al., 2020)	*HR practices for enhancing sustainable employability: implementation, use, and outcomes*	2020	Netherlands	312 organizations (owners/directors or HR managers) from various industries and sizes	Questionnaire with 69 items measuring:	Organizations implemented an average of 14 out of 23 HR practices. Perceived effectiveness of HR practices was higher when more practices were implemented, employees used them more, and employees participated in their design. HR practice implementation was linked to higher employability and increased productivity. Small organizations showed stronger health culture, higher practice usage, and more employee participation than large ones, despite implementing fewer practices.
9	(Semeijn et al., 2019)	*Cross-lagged effects of resilience and indicators of sustainable employability: a study among Dutch police officers*	2019	Netherlands	Dutch Police Officers (n=532)	Resilience: Dutch version of the 25-item Resilience Scale (Wagnild & Young, 1993).	This study evaluates the cross-lagged effects of resilience on SE factors, such as vitality and absenteeism, among Dutch police officer's significant reciprocal, cross-lagged

						Vitality: 3-item Vitality dimension from the Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (UWES). Workability: Single item from the shortened Dutch Workability Index. Absenteeism: Organizational records (days absent).	effects were found between resilience (T1) and vitality (T2), and vitality (T1) and resilience (T2). Resilience did not have a significant cross-lagged influence on absenteeism. Vitality at T1 had a near-significant negative effect on absenteeism at T2. The study emphasizes the need for resilience training to enhance sustainable employability among police officers
10	(Fleuren et al., 2024)	*Love over gold and mind over matter? Identifying capabilities that preserve medical assistants' sustainable employability*	2024	USA	Medical assistants (MAs)	Copenhagen Psychosocial Questionnaire (COPSOQ)	Meaningful relationships at work significantly reduce burnout and intention to quit and increase work meaningfulness. Earning a good income only relates to job satisfaction, not to other SE outcomes. Developing knowledge/skills increases work meaningfulness but using skills without development increases intention to quit. Contributing to something valuable reduces intention to quit. Salaries alone are insufficient; relationships and development opportunities are crucial for retention. The capability framework used in the study posits that when workers possess strong capabilities, their employability is sustained over time.
11	(Gürbüz et al., 2022)	*Employable until Retirement: How Inclusive Leadership and HR Practices Can Foster Sustainable Employability through Strengths Use*	2022	Netherlands	364 Dutch working individuals (LISS panel)	- Capability Set for Work Questionnaire (CSWQ)	Both inclusive leadership and high-involvement HR practices positively predict SE. Strengths use (leveraging personal abilities for optimal performance plays a mediating role between inclusive leadership/high-involvement HR practices and SE.
12	(Ritchie et al., 2022)	*Dementia, Work and Employability:*	2022	United Kingdom	38 key informants (e.g. HR	Semi-structured	The study identifies multiple barriers to SE for people living

		Using the Capability Approach to Understand the Employability Potential for People Living with Dementia			professionals, policymakers, support organization representatives, trade union representatives, lawyers, and 2 individuals living with dementia)	interviews (Secondary qualitative analysis using Framework Analysis)	with dementia, framed through the Capability Approach. Personal & Work Resources ("Being able to"): Individuals retain skills, but symptoms and job demands interact. Stigma and a focus on deficits rather than abilities undermine perceived capacity. Material Resources ("Having opportunity to"): Late or absent diagnosis blocks access to support and legal protections. Existing workplace policies (e.g., performance management) are often misapplied. Support services are underutilized and not dementia informed. Physical & Social Environment ("Being facilitated to"): Stigma, lack of awareness, and poor understanding of legal obligations among employers and colleagues are significant barriers. Line manager relationships and workplace culture are critical conversion factors. "Adaptive preference" (lowered expectations) can limit individuals' own perceptions of their employability. People with dementia can work, but their capabilities are constrained by a complex interplay of personal, material, and social-contextual factors rather than just cognitive impairment. Holistic, multi-disciplinary support and a shift in workplace culture are needed. The findings shed light on how stigma and limited understanding of dementia can affect employability at the societal, organizational and individual levels.
13	(Neupane et al., 2022)	*Indicators of Sustainable Employability among Older Finnish Postal Service Employees: A Longitudinal Study of Age and Time Effects*	2022	Finland	Older postal service employees (≥50 years); N=1262 at follow-up; 60% male, mean age 56 years	Self-reported questionnaire with validated single-item measures for nine indicators across three domains (Health, Well-being, Employability).	Eight of nine SE (e.g., work ability, job satisfaction) showed no significant change over a two-year follow-up. Self-rated health declined significantly over time. Age had a significant effect on six indicators (self-rated health, work ability, time/resources, recovery, job satisfaction, perceived employment). Results suggest the indicators are stable over

		time and feasible for measuring SE, with age being an important determinant.

Figure 1: *PRISMA*



Synthesis

Study Characteristics

A total of 13 articles met the criteria for inclusion in the systematic literature review. A summary of studies is presented in Table 2. The publications span from 2019 to early 2026, as the construct of SE is still relatively in its infancy stage and evolving. Geographically, the studies were conducted in European countries, including the Netherlands: 6 studies, the United Kingdom: 2, with single studies from Italy, Finland, China, South Korea, and the USA. The studies included a diverse set of populations encompassing specific professions such as police officers, firefighters, postal employees, and entertainment professionals, as well as the general working population and vulnerable populations such as patients with dementia. Methodologically, the review includes quantitative (n=8), qualitative (n=4), and mixed-methods studies (n=1). This variety provides a diverse perspective on SE.

Conceptual definitions of sustainable employability (RQ1*)*

To address the first research question, we extracted the explicit or implicit definitions of sustainable employability from the 13 articles included. The definitions are summarized along with the key emphasis in those definitions in Table 3. The thematic analysis revealed three dominant conceptual clusters: the capability approach, the able and willing framework and health, wellbeing, and employability models.

Capability Approach

This approach has been followed in n=9 studies and was originally articulated by (Van der Klink et al., 2016). This approach defines SE as a worker's set of capabilities to achieve valuable functioning at work now and in the future, while focusing on health and well-being too. For instance, Picco et al. (2024) define SE as "a worker's extensive set of capabilities to make a valuable contribution over time." Likewise, Egdell et al. (2023), Gürbüz et al. (2022) and Ritchie et al. (2022) adopted this framework as well. These studies emphasized the tangible opportunities, a supportive work context, and employees' attitude and motivation. One significant factor in this cluster is the emphasis on conversion factors. Conversion factors are the conditions which enable individuals to turn their capabilities into actual functioning (Sen, 1992).

"Able and willingness" Framework

Sustainable employability was defined as a worker's ability and willingness to remain working, now and in the future. Courchesne et al. (2024) stated that SE is "the extent to which workers are able and willing to remain working now and in the future. This is shaped by the interaction between the employees and their environment." Ybema et al. (2020) operationalize SE through employability, work motivation and health. Semeijn et al. (2019) refer to "the individual's possibilities and capabilities to continue to work and further develop work while maintaining vitality and health." This cluster focused on outcome-focused measuring of SE.

Health, well-being and Employability

Two studies adopted the framework proposed by Fleuren et al. (2020) which conceptualizes SE as an inherently longitudinal and multidimensional individual characteristic including health, well-being and employability. They defined it as "individuals' long-term abilities to work and remain employed." Neupane et al. (2022) operationalize this model using nine single- item indicators across the three domains (e.g., self-rated health, job satisfaction and perceived employment). This cluster focused on measurement- oriented definitions.

Other Definitions

Some studies defined SE in such a manner that it couldn't be placed in the above-mentioned clusters. Shao et al. (2021) emphasize continuous learning and skill development as the foundation of SE, reflecting a dynamic, adaptability-focused perspective. Rhee et al. (2021) define SE as organizational responsibility. Moreover, den Boer et al. (2021) focused on older workers conceptualizing SE as employees' capacity to remain satisfied and continue working through improved vitality and work ability.

Consensus and Divergence

Across all the definitions, there is a strong consensus that SE is multidimensional and longitudinal (Fleuren et al., 2016). However, divergence exists on three key factors: (1) where SE is an individual characteristic (Fleuren et al.,

2020), or a dynamic interaction between person and environment (Courchesne et al., 2025) (2) the relative emphasis on health and well-being versus capabilities and opportunities, and (3) the role of organizational responsibility (Rhee et al., 2021). This conceptual heterogeneity directly informs the determinants identified in RQ2 and categorization in RQ3.

Determinants of sustainable employability (RQ2 & RQ3)

The following synthesis organizes the evidence from the 13 included studies according to the key factors influencing SE. Drawing on the capability approach and ecological model that underpin much of this research, the findings are categorized into personal, social/relational, and contextual/organizational factors. These categories are not mutually exclusive but interact dynamically to shape an individual's capacity to maintain productive and healthy work throughout their working life.

Personal Factors

Personal factors refer to individual characteristics, capabilities, health status, psychological resources and intrinsic motivation that employees bring to the workplace (Álvarez-González et al., 2024; Meerman et al., 2022). These factors contribute to the ability and willingness to sustain employability. It includes health and work ability. Neupane et al. (2022) in their longitudinal study for older Finnish postal service employees highlighted that self-rated health deteriorated over a two-year follow-up. Other SE indicators (e.g., work ability, job satisfaction and recovery) remained stable. Age has a positive impact on nine indicators, underscoring the importance of health maintenance for older workers. Courchesne et al. (2025) reported that when employees participated in network-based personal and career development activities, it affected their work ability and perceived employability; however, vitality was not affected. It suggested that energy and engagement may depend on more intrinsic or recovery-related factors.

Psychological resources such as resilience and vitality showed reciprocal relationships. Semeijn et al. (2019) studying cross-lagged effects between resilience and vitality over time were identified among Dutch police officers. However, resilience did not significantly predict absenteeism, suggesting that psychological resources may influence some SE outcomes but not others. Furthermore, the freedom and opportunity to achieve personally valued outcomes at work, known as valuable work capabilities were identified as a central node in the SE network among the Italian entertainment professionals (Picco et al., 2024). This finding suggested that SE is not only about having the skills but also about the ability to enact them in personally meaningful ways. For people living with dementia, personal resources (Retained skills and knowledge) are often overshadowed by stigma and a focus on deficits which constrains perceived employability (Ritchie et al., 2022).

Intrinsic motivation and personal drive were relevant but were dependent on the context. Personal factors like intrinsic motivation had lower predictability in the SE network compared to organizational-level factors. It indicated that in precarious or project-based work contexts, individual motivation alone may be insufficient without supportive conditions (Picco et al., 2024). Internet use and digital skills also emerged as a personal and capability factor. For middle-aged and older and rural population as well as freelancers internet use enhanced SE (Shao et al., 2021). Digital access plays a role as a conversion factor that enables SE. it is driven by changing skill requirements ongoing learning and greater labor market adaptability.

Social and Relational Factors

Social factors include relational dynamics, leadership behaviors, relationships with supervisors and colleagues. It also includes wider network-based interactions that facilitate or limit SE. Some other social factors include inclusive leadership and leader-member exchange (LMX). Gürbüz et al. (2022) found that inclusive leadership is positively correlated with sustainable employability through the mediating role of strengths use. It leverages one’s abilities for optimal performance. Courchesne et al. (2025) reported that LMX moderated the association between personal development activities and work ability. It indicated that high-quality supervisor relationships enhance the benefits of development opportunities while low-quality relationships diminish them.

Meaningful relationships at work emerged as a

critical protective factor. Fleuren et al. (2020) studying medical assistants in US primary care found that meaningful relationships at work significantly reduced burnout and intention to quit while increasing work meaningfulness. Earning a good income related to job satisfaction, not to the outcomes, suggesting that social relationships may be more consequential for retention than financial compensation alone. Interpersonal network mechanisms were essential for fostering SE within interorganizational contexts. Courchesne et al. (2024) through a focus group study on network coordinators and HR professionals, several key interpersonal success factors were identified. Some factors included trust and reciprocity, open communication and collaboration and a convivial culture with shared values. These findings indicate that SE is co-created through positive trust-based social interactions within and across organizational boundaries.

Furthermore, social work characteristics include cooperation with colleagues. Teamwork, mentoring roles, supervisor support and client interaction were identified as important for older employees' extended working lives (den Boer et al., 2021). These social characteristics varied by job type, with managers particularly valuing colleague contact and professionals benefiting from client interaction.

Organizational/ contextual Factors

Organizational and contextual factors refer to broader structural policy, environmental, and labor market conditions that shape the opportunities and constraints within which individuals pursue SE. HR practices were among the most consistently identified organizational determinants. Ybema et al. (2020) found that organizations implemented an average of 14 out of 23 HR practices and perceived effectiveness was higher when more practices were implemented, employees used them more and employees participated in their design. HR practice implementation was linked to higher employability and increased productivity. Notably, small organizations showed stronger health culture, higher practice usage and more employee participation than large ones, despite implementing fewer practices.

High-involvement HR practices emerged as a stronger and direct predictor of SE than inclusive leadership, while strength use functioned as a mediating mechanism (Gürbüz et al., 2022). Thereby, leadership alone cannot suffice for SE. Many factors such as development programs for employees (Ng et al., 2024) and participation play an important role. There are certain factors such as job design and work characteristics which can either enable or act as a barrier for SE (den Boer et al., 2021). Job design is an essential part of human resource management. It can affect different employee, team-based, or organizational outcomes (Morgeson & Campion, 2003; Morgeson & Humphrey, 2006). Different job types such as operational, professional or managerial share certain features. They include autonomy, client interaction and mentorship. However, each type also presents different unique needs (Morgeson & Humphrey, 2006). Supervisor support and comfortable workplaces are more required in operational capacity. Professional roles call for opportunities to apply expertise and flexible scheduling. Whereas managerial roles value having supportive coworkers. Adapting job design to these occupational roles offers a viable strategy to sustain employment (den Boer et al., 2021).

Some organizational level interventions are more beneficial than focusing on individual-level practices. Organizational-level conversion factors which include policies relating to SE as well as social policies. They had the highest predictability in the SE network compared to personal factors (Picco et al., 2024). Organizations practicing CSR activities contribute towards sustainable employment.

CSR promoted better job environments and as a result number of regular employment was increased and strengthened long-term labor sustainability Rhee et al. (2021).

There are certain high-risk jobs such as firefighters where the physical and emotional demands negatively affected the SE. Similarly, the organizational pressures (e.g., redeployment and under sourcing), lack of time to cater for health and fitness also compromised the sustainable working lives. These systematic challenges strained workers' ability to remain employed over time (Egdell et al., 2023). Furthermore, some interorganizational factors were driven by contextual factors such as labor market challenges

job precarity and sector-specific skill shortages (Courchesne et al., 2024). Structural factors such as flat network structures clearly specified roles and expectations and shared network activities were essential for establishing environments where SE could flourish.

Technology and digital infrastructure functioned as contextual contributors. Shao et al. (2021) found that workplace computerization strengthened the positive association between internet use and SE and informal and foreign-owned enterprises showed stronger gains than state-owned enterprises. Contextual barriers for a specific population were highlighted by Ritchie et al. (2022) who found that people living with dementia, late or absent diagnosis, have blocked access to support and legal protections. Existing workplace policies (e.g., performance management) were often misapplied, support services were underutilized and not dementia informed. The stigma attached to it and the lack of awareness among employers and colleagues were significant barriers demonstrating how contextual factors can override individual capabilities.

Synthesis Across Factors

These studies demonstrated that SE is determined by a complex interplay of personal, social and organizational/contextual level factors. HR practices, SE policies, and job design appeared to have a strong effect on SE outcomes (Gürbüz et al., 2022; Picco et al., 2024; Ybema et al., 2020). Secondly, social and relational mechanisms such as leadership quality and meaningful work relationships function as a conversion factor that enables or restrains the translation of personal capabilities into SE (Courchesne et al., 2025; Fleuren et al., 2020). Thirdly, while personal factors such as health, resilience and digital skill remain important, their influence is powerfully shaped, either enabling or constraining different policies, structures and labor market conditions in which individuals are embedded (Egdell et al., 2023; Ritchie et al., 2022; Shao et al., 2021). These findings lend support the conceptual framework proposed by Fleuren et al. (2020), which proposes that SE theoretically includes capabilities and person environment fit as potential antecedents of SE. It necessitates long term multifaceted strategies to monitor and enhance SE outcomes.

Discussion

This systematic review synthesized evidence from 13 studies to illuminate both the contested definitions of SE and the multi-level factors that shape it. This discussion proceeds by (1) interpreting the three dominant conceptual clusters identified in our analysis, (2) critically examining the multi-level determinants, and (3) proposal of an integrated framework.

Conceptual divergence

Our thematic analysis revealed that the field of SE is characterized by productive tension rather than settled consensus. Three distinct conceptual clusters, namely: the capability approach, the ability and willingness framework and the health/well-being/employability model, offer competing yet complementary perspectives.

The capability approach adopted in the majority of the included studies conceives SE as a set of tangible opportunities that workers possess to achieve valued functioning at work now and in the future (Gürbüz et al., 2024; Gürbüz et al., 2022; Van der Klink et al., 2016). By framing SE around what workers have genuine opportunities to be and do the capability approach foregrounds the enabling conditions and what Sen (2008) termed as “conversion factors” which determine whether individuals potential translates into sustainable work participation. As prospective longitudinal evidence confirms that the capability set positively predicts desirable work outcomes while reducing burnout over two years (Gürbüz et al., 2024).

In contrast, the ability and willingness framework operationalizes SE through measurable constructs such as employability, work motivation and health. (Le Blanc et al., 2017). This cluster offers practical advantages for empirical investigations as these constructs can be reliably measured using established instruments. Yet this approach carries a limitation. It reduces SE to a static individual attribute. The health, well-being, and employability model provides a measurement-oriented definition. It integrates nine single-item indicators across three domains which facilitates large-scale survey research but at the possible expense of ecological validity.

The divergence among these clusters is not merely a difference in words or definitions. But there is a

fundamental difference among these approaches. The capability approach emphasizes organizational and policy-level factors which enable workers to transform their resources into sustainable employment (Meerman et al., 2022; Van der Klink et al., 2016). Whereas the ability-willingness framework focuses on psychological and motivational factors. It argues that enhancing SE is primarily a matter of employee self-development. Understanding this divergence is fundamental. Future scholarship would benefit from a more intentional dialogue between these frameworks rather than treating them as mutually exclusive.

An integrated theoretical Framework for understanding SE determinants

The determinants identified across the studies can be meaningfully organized within an integrated multi-level framework that synthesizes insights from the capability approach with established career and motivational theories. Drawing on the Job Demands- Resources (JD-R) model, which has been increasingly applied to SE research (Beekman et al., 2025; van Duijnhoven et al., 2026). And the conservation of resources theory (Jabeen et al., 2022). This review proposes that SE is not a static attribute but a continuously evolving outcome of resource accumulation, conversion and reinforcement processes.

At the individual level, personal resources such as health, resilience, digital competence, and motivation provide the foundational capacity for sustainable employment. At the social level, relationships with supervisors and colleagues function as critical conversion mechanisms. High-quality leader-member exchange, trust-based interactions and meaningful workplace relationships enhance the utilization of individual resources (Courchesne et al., 2025). At the organizational level, HR practices, job design and inclusive policies act as a structural enablement that determines whether individual and social resources are translated into sustained employability outcomes. The integrated framework developed from this review aligns with the Bioecological Model(Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2007; Llinares Insa et al., 2016), which posits that individual outcomes emerge from reciprocal interactions between personal characteristics and multiple environmental systems. The identified determinants of SE span individual, interpersonal, and organizational levels. It suggests that SE should be understood as an ecological phenomenon rather than merely an individual capability. Therefore, we propose that SE may be conceptualized as a multi-level resource-to-capability conversion system in which sustainable employability emerges from the interaction between individual resources, relational enablers and organizational structures under contextual constraints.

Vulnerable populations: contextual override of individual capabilities

A particularly striking insight emerging from this review concerns the vulnerability of certain populations whose SE is constrained not primarily by individual deficits but by contextual barriers that systematically disable their capabilities. Late and absent diagnosis blocked access to both support and legal protections. The existing workplace policies were not properly applied and there was underutilization of support services as well. All these factors contribute to lack of awareness among co-workers and create barriers for such a vulnerable population (Ritchie et al., 2022; Teborg et al., 2024). People with dementia were constantly overshadowed. This points out to an important contextual stigma which can suppress what these individuals are capable of achieving. It suggests that there should be interventions for such vulnerable populations (Grau-del-Valle et al., 2025). These interventions should bring about changes in workplace policies, legal protection and social attitudes of people around them (Hazelzet et al., 2019; Heijkants et al., 2023; Picco et al., 2022).

Digital Transformation: Shaping the Future of Sustainable Employability

Digital access acts as a conversion factor that enhances SE through higher skill requirements, continuous learning and improved labor and career adaptability (Shao et al., 2021). However, there is another side of the story too. The OECD Employment Outlook 2025 reflects that AI use can weaken routine cognitive and clerical skills. It affects older employees depending on domain, education level, and existing skills (OECD, 2025). In this contemporary world the narrative about digital skills and lifelong learning is really powerful. However, the access is stratified. If it

remains unaddressed, there will be a huge digital divide representing a very important factor of SE inequality. However, the need of the hour is instead of painting digitalization as a threat, for SE organizations can develop support programs for their employees. These efforts should be targeted to support especially those employees who are vulnerable to technological displacement (Abbes, 2025).

Future Research Directions

Future studies may examine SE across different institutions, cultural, and social context. The extant literature on SE is Western-centric, so future studies may explore SE in developing economies. In addition, occupation-specific and gender specific investigations such as women working in different sectors are needed to develop targeted interventions. Future studies may investigate multi-level influences such as the individual interpersonal and social level to holistically understand SE.

Limitations

One limitation of the present study is that it is based on a limited body of studies (n=13). Second, the geographic concentration in Western European contexts may limit transferability. The categorization into domains involves interpretive judgment and interactions between domains are likely more complex than any static categorization captures.

Conclusion

This review establishes that SE is a multi-level phenomenon shaped by personal, social, and organizational factors. Organizational policies and interpersonal relationships exert powerful influences on individual outcomes, challenging individualistic narratives and underscoring shared responsibility. Findings across vulnerable populations and emerging technological transformations demonstrate that contextual conversion factors can systematically override individual capabilities. It underscores the limits of individually focused interventions. Sustainable employability is not only an individual responsibility but a shared organizational and societal imperative. It requires systematic conversion factors that transform capability into continuity.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that they have no financial, personal, or professional conflicts of interest that could have influenced the research, analysis, interpretation, or reporting of the findings presented in this manuscript.

Declaration

The authors declare that this manuscript is an original work and has not been published previously or submitted for publication elsewhere. All authors have read and approved the final version of the manuscript and agree to its submission to the *Journal of Emerging Trends in Social Sciences and Humanities (JoETSSH)* The study is based on a systematic review of previously published literature and does not involve the collection of new data from human participants.

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