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Servant leadership and perceived employability: proactive career behaviours as mediators

Servant
leadership and
perceived
employability

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to investigate the effects of servant leadership on perceived employability and examine the mediating role of three proactive career behaviours, namely, career planning, skill development and networking behaviour in this relationship.

Design/methodology/approach – Data for this study were collected from 176 employees who were working in a large food and beverage company operating in Pakistan. Structural equation modelling and the bootstrapping procedure were used to test the research hypotheses.

Findings – Results showed that servant leadership was positively related to career planning, skill development and networking behaviour, which, in turn, were positively associated with perceived employability. Furthermore, it was found that the three proactive career behaviours fully mediated the effects of servant leadership on perceived employability.

Practical implications – The findings of this study indicate that servant leadership can play a key role in enhancing workers' employability. Thus, it is important that organisations focus on creating conditions, which help them to develop servant leaders.

Originality/value – This is the first study, which has empirically established a link between servant leadership and perceived employability. In addition, it uncovers three distinct mechanisms in the form of career planning, networking behaviour and skill development through which servant leadership can influence workers' employability.

Keywords Servant leadership, Career planning, Perceived employability, Networking behaviour, Skill development

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

The recent trend towards downsizing, delayering and offshoring has increased feelings of job insecurity among employees (Berntson *et al.*, 2006; De Cuyper *et al.*, 2012). Job insecurity, which refers to employees' perceptions about potential involuntary job loss (De Witte, 1999), has been shown to manifest in negative outcomes such as lower organisational commitment, reduced productivity and poor health and well-being (Sverke *et al.*, 2002). Thus, in order to ensure the smooth functioning of the organisation, it is imperative that managers take the necessary steps to reduce employees' feelings of job insecurity and its concomitant costs.

In this scenario, the concept of perceived employability has emerged as a possible way of dealing with job insecurity and its negative consequences. Specifically, it is defined as “the individual's perception of his or her possibilities to achieve a new job” (Berntson *et al.*, 2006, p. 225). Perceived employability can mitigate feelings of job insecurity because employees who consider themselves to be employable tend to believe that they possess the knowledge, skills and experience that are transferable across different jobs or organisations and therefore feel more confident about securing a new job if and when required (Rothwell and Arnold, 2007; De Cuyper *et al.*, 2012).

Previous research has shown that perceived employability is a key personal resource, which can deliver several valued outcomes (De Cuyper *et al.*, 2012; Bozionelos *et al.*, 2016). For instance, it has been found that perceived employability can lead to greater productivity (Fugate *et al.*, 2004), improved health and well-being (Berntson and Marklund, 2007) and higher levels of career success (De Vos *et al.*, 2011).



In view of the potential advantages of perceived employability, many studies have sought to identify both individual factors (Fugate and Kinicki, 2008; Wittekind *et al.*, 2010) and contextual characteristics (Nauta *et al.*, 2009) that can enhance workers' employability. Leadership is one potentially important contextual influence on perceived employability (Van der Heijden and Bakker, 2011). However, to date there has been limited research connecting leadership to workers' employability. The small number of studies conducted in this area have mainly focused on examining the effects of transformational leadership (Van der Heijden and Bakker, 2011) and leader-member exchange (Schyns *et al.*, 2007) on perceived employability. Thus, more research in this field is warranted to acquire a deeper insight into the leadership-perceived employability relationship.

The present research therefore contributes to the emerging theoretical and empirical research on perceived employability by examining the impact of servant leadership on workers' employability. This study focused on servant leadership because this leadership style is expected to have a significant effect on perceived employability. The core characteristic of servant leaders is that they set aside their personal interests and exclusively focus on fulfilling the needs of their followers (Barbuto and Wheeler, 2006; Liden *et al.*, 2015). Unlike other leadership styles (e.g. transformational leadership), where the ultimate goal is the well-being of the organisation, a servant leader is mainly concerned with creating conditions that help followers to grow and develop (Van Dierendonck, 2011). Previous research has shown that such people-oriented behaviours are likely to play a key role in enhancing employees' employability (Bozionelos *et al.*, 2016).

To further understand the relationship between servant leadership and perceived employability, this study also sought to identify the underlying mechanisms through which servant leadership relates to workers' employability. Previous research has shown that supportive leadership practices that help individuals to be self-directed and self-managing are likely to stimulate proactive work behaviours in the workplace (Parker *et al.*, 2006). In light of this evidence, it is argued that the empowering and developmental behaviours demonstrated by servant leaders will inspire employees to take charge of their own careers by engaging in proactive career behaviours.

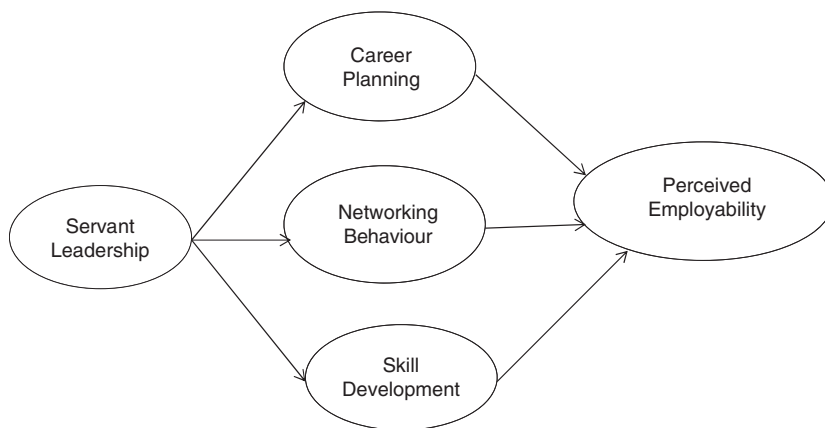
Recent research has highlighted the importance of several proactive career behaviours for successful career management (Eby *et al.*, 2003; King, 2004; Taber and Blankemeyer, 2015). However, the present study focuses on three proactive career behaviours: career planning, skill development and networking that reflect the "know why", "know how" and "know whom" competencies, which are necessary to succeed in the present era of boundaryless careers (Defillipi and Arthur, 1994). Past studies have shown that these proactive career behaviours can have a significant impact on workers' employability (e.g. De Vos and Soens, 2008).

On the basis of the above arguments, it is anticipated that the exhibition of servant leadership behaviours will motivate employees to engage in career planning, skill development and networking, which, in turn, will boost their employability. In other words, it is proposed that the link between servant leadership and perceived employability will be mediated by these proactive career behaviours. Figure 1 presents the conceptual model examined in this study.

Literature review and hypotheses development

The concept of servant leadership

According to Greenleaf (1977), servant leadership is not just a management technique but a way of life, which begins with the "natural feeling that one wants to serve, to serve first" (p. 7). More recently, Liden *et al.* (2008) conducted a comprehensive review of the literature and identified seven dimensions of servant leadership. Specifically, servant leaders genuinely care about the well-being of their followers (emotional healing); strive to help the communities in which they operate (creating value for the community); possess the knowledge, skills and abilities that are necessary for solving work-related problems



Servant leadership and perceived employability

Figure 1.
Hypothesised model

(conceptual skills); give their followers more freedom, responsibility and decision-making authority (empowering); help followers to grow and realise their full potential (helping subordinates grow and succeed); place followers' needs and interests ahead of their own (putting subordinates first); and interact with their followers in an open, fair and transparent manner (behaving ethically).

Not surprisingly, research has shown that servant leadership is positively associated with several important follower outcomes such as job satisfaction (Van Dierendonck and Nuijten, 2011), work engagement (Van Dierendonck *et al.*, 2014), organisational citizenship behaviour (Walumbwa *et al.*, 2010), creativity (Liden *et al.*, 2015), health and well-being (Chen *et al.*, 2013) and job performance (Chiniara and Bentein, 2016).

Although servant leadership seems to have some conceptual overlap with other positive forms of leadership such as transformational leadership, ethical leadership and authentic leadership, there is mounting evidence, which suggests that it is distinct from these related leadership theories. For instance, Stone *et al.* (2004) observed that the "extent to which the leader is able to shift the primary focus of leadership from the organisation to the follower is the distinguishing factor in classifying leaders as either transformational or servant leader" (p. 1). Similarly, Barbuto and Wheeler (2006) contended that while servant leadership focuses on a desire to serve and on preparing others to serve, transformational leadership fosters a desire to lead and inspire followers to perform well.

In addition, servant leadership contains a moral component, which is similar to that of authentic leadership (Hunter *et al.*, 2013). However, unlike authentic leadership, servant leadership is also uniquely concerned with the well-being of all organisational stakeholders (Walumbwa *et al.*, 2010).

Furthermore, there are some similarities between ethical leadership and servant leadership because both forms of leadership focus on caring for people, integrity and serving the good for all (Van Dierendonck, 2011). However, in ethical leadership, the emphasis is more on directive and normative behaviour, while servant leadership has a stronger focus on developing followers (Van Dierendonck, 2011).

Finally, several empirical studies have demonstrated that servant leadership explains unique variance in follower outcomes such as in-role job performance, employee commitment and citizenship behaviour beyond that predicted by transformational leadership and leader-member exchange models (e.g. Ehrhart, 2004; Liden *et al.*, 2008). Based on this evidence, it is reasonable to conclude that servant leadership is a distinct leadership style, which is important in its own right (Walumbwa *et al.*, 2010).

Servant leadership and proactive career behaviours

In the current business environment, which is characterised by constant change and decreased job stability, the individual has the primary responsibility for managing his or her career (Sturges *et al.*, 2002; Vanhercke *et al.*, 2014). This implies that employees now have to engage in a range of proactive career behaviours to create career options that enable them to accomplish their career goals and ensure their employability (King 2004; De Vos and Soens, 2008). Specifically, proactive career behaviours refer to the “deliberate actions undertaken by individuals in order to realise their career goals” (De Vos *et al.*, 2009, p. 763). As mentioned earlier, the present study focuses on three proactive career behaviours, namely, career planning, skill development and networking.

Networking behaviour is defined as “individuals’ attempts to develop and maintain relationships with others who have the potential to assist them in their work or career” (Forret and Dougherty, 2004, p. 420). Specific examples of networking behaviour include developing contacts, engaging in professional activities and increasing internal visibility (Sturges *et al.*, 2002; Forret and Dougherty, 2004). Career planning involves setting clear career goals and developing strategies to accomplish those goals (Wayne *et al.*, 1999; De Vos *et al.*, 2009). Finally, skill development refers to making strategic investments in training or educational qualifications needed for future promotions (King, 2004).

It is expected that servant leadership will stimulate employees to engage in these proactive career behaviours. Previous research has shown that servant leaders empower their subordinates by giving them more autonomy and decision-making authority, provide diagnostic feedback to improve their performance and encourage them to develop their skills and abilities (Van Dierendonck, 2011; Chiniara and Bentein, 2016). Such positive actions on part of the leader are likely to raise employees’ self-efficacy (Liden *et al.*, 2015). Research evidence indicates that efficacious individuals possess a strong desire to gain control over their career outcomes and therefore are more likely to exhibit proactive career behaviours such as setting career goals, developing contacts and pursuing developmental opportunities (King, 2004; Ballout, 2009).

In addition, servant leaders’ tendency to empower their subordinates is likely to satisfy subordinates’ need for autonomy (Chiniara and Bentein, 2016). Self-determination theory (Ryan and Deci, 2000) suggests that the fulfilment of the basic human need for autonomy can increase employees’ intrinsic motivation, which, in turn, may induce them to engage in career self-management behaviours (Parker *et al.*, 2010).

To date, no previous study has examined the impact of servant leadership on proactive career behaviours. However, on the basis of the above arguments, the following hypotheses are stated:

- H1. Servant leadership is positively related to career planning.
- H2. Servant leadership is positively related to networking behaviour.
- H3. Servant leadership is positively related to skill development.

Proactive career behaviours and perceived employability

It is further proposed that the three proactive career behaviours will positively contribute to employees’ employability. The theoretical link between career planning and perceived employability can be explained through the framework of the career planning model developed by Gould (1979). A salient feature of this model is that it equates career planning with goal setting (Aryee and Debrah, 1993; Wayne *et al.*, 1999). Specifically, this model contends that employees, who engage in career planning, set specific and challenging career goals for themselves. According to the goal-setting theory (Locke and Latham 2002), such goals inspire employees to develop and implement career strategies to accomplish

these goals. The effective implementation of career strategies subsequently enables employees to attain their career goals and enhance their employability (Clements and Kamau, 2018). Thus, it is predicted:

H4. Career planning is positively related to perceived employability.

In addition, networking behaviour is also expected to manifest in higher employability. Previous research has shown that employees' inclination to engage in this behaviour increases their options for development, provides them access to new contacts and possible job opportunities and enhances their visibility by exposing them to important people both inside and outside the organisation (Forret and Dougherty, 2004; Van Hove *et al.*, 2009). The confluence of these factors, in turn, is likely to enhance workers' employability (Eby *et al.*, 2003). Hence, it is proposed:

H5. Networking behaviour is positively related to perceived employability.

Finally, employees' tendency to develop their skills through investments in training and education should also improve their employability. The human capital theory suggests that such investments enhance employees' value in the labour market and as a consequence help them to attain more favourable career outcomes (Becker, 1993; Judge *et al.*, 1995). Several empirical studies have demonstrated that investments in human capital are positively associated with perceived employability (Van der Heijde and Van der Heijden, 2006; Wittekind *et al.*, 2010; Vanhercke *et al.*, 2014). In light of this evidence, it is hypothesised:

H6. Skill development is positively related to perceived employability.

The mediating role of proactive career behaviours

As discussed in the preceding paragraphs, servant leadership is expected to have a positive impact on workers' employability. Servant leaders transcend self-interest and exclusively focus on facilitating the growth and development of their followers (Van Dierendonck, 2011). Specifically, these leaders strive to determine followers' career goals, provide followers with opportunities to enhance their skills and help them to accomplish their goals (Liden *et al.*, 2008). Such behaviours, in turn, are likely to increase followers' employability (e.g. Bozionelos *et al.*, 2016).

However, previous research has indicated that leaders are unlikely to have a direct effect on their followers' attitudes and behaviours (De Jong and Den Hartog, 2007). On the contrary, they are more likely to influence their followers indirectly by shaping their work environment (Ilies *et al.*, 2005; Nielsen *et al.*, 2008).

In view of this evidence, it is argued that the direct effect of servant leadership on perceived employability will be mediated by the three proactive career behaviours included in this study. Specifically, it is envisaged that servant leadership behaviours will encourage employees to set goals, improve their skills and develop contacts (*H1–H3*). It is further postulated that the exhibition of such behaviours will eventually have a positive effect on employees' employability (*H4–H6*). Based on this rationale, the following three hypotheses are formulated:

H7. Career planning will mediate the relationship between servant leadership and perceived employability.

H8. Skill development will mediate the relationship between servant leadership and perceived employability.

H9. Networking behaviour will mediate the relationship between servant leadership and perceived employability.

Method

Sample and procedure

This study was part of a larger project, which took place within the context of a leading food and beverage company located in Pakistan. The main purpose of this project was to analyse issues relating to leadership practices, employee well-being and career development within the company. The present study, however, exclusively focused on examining the link between servant leadership and perceived employability. This was done to illustrate how supportive leadership practices can be used to improve the career prospects of employees employed in Pakistani organisations.

The sample for this study comprised of full-time employees who were working in the head office of the company. The total number of employees working in the head office was 270. Data for this research were collected by administering a paper and pencil questionnaire to all the 270 employees. Specifically, the author handed over the required number of questionnaires along with a cover letter guaranteeing anonymity to the relevant officials of the company for distribution to each participant. Participation in this study was completely voluntary. The respondents completed the questionnaire and returned it in a sealed envelope to the concerned officials. The completed questionnaires were subsequently collected from the company’s head office by the author.

Of the 270 questionnaires that were distributed, 176 useable questionnaires were received, thereby yielding a response rate of 65.2 per cent. The demographic characteristics of the sample are presented in Table I. On average, the responding individuals were 33.3 years (SD = 6.91) of age and had 4.9 years (SD = 4.91) of organisational tenure. Most of the participants were male (93 per cent). About 43 per cent of the respondents held a post-graduate degree, 53 per cent held an undergraduate degree and roughly 2 per cent held a high school diploma.

Measures

Validated scales were extracted from the literature to measure the study variables. All the scales were used in their original form and are provided in full in the Appendix.

Servant leadership. Servant leadership was measured by the seven-item scale developed by Liden *et al.* (2015). A sample item includes: “My boss makes my career development a priority”. All items were scored on a five-point scale ranging from 1 = strongly disagree

Demographics	<i>n</i>	%	Demographics	<i>n</i>	%
<i>Gender^a (n = 173)</i>			<i>Age^a (n = 173)</i>		
Male	161	93.1	20–29	66	38.2
Female	12	6.9	30–39	73	42.2
			40–49	30	17.3
			50 and above	4	2.3
			Mean age (years)	33.3	
			SD	6.91	
<i>Education^a (n = 170)</i>			<i>Tenure^a (n = 173)</i>		
High school	3	1.7	0.1–3.50	102	59
Bachelors	92	53.2	4–7.50	35	20.2
Masters	75	43.4	8–11.50	17	9.8
			12–15.50	12	6.9
			16 and above	7	4
			Mean tenure (years)	4.9	
			SD	4.91	

Note: ^aSome of the data for these variables are missing

Table I. Demographic characteristics of the sample

to 5 = strongly agree. Liden *et al.* (2015) reported that Cronbach's α of this scale ranged between 0.80 and 0.90 across three independent studies with six samples. The Cronbach's α reliability of the scale in the present study was 0.86.

Perceived employability. Perceived employability was assessed with the three-item scale developed by De Vos and Soens (2008). A sample item includes: "I believe I could easily obtain a comparable job with another employer". Respondents rated the three items on a five-point scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). De Vos and Soens (2008) in their study reported that the Cronbach's α of the scale was 0.91. The Cronbach's α reliability of the scale in the present study was 0.84.

Proactive career behaviours. The proactive career behaviours were measured with the career planning, proactive skill development and network building sub-scales of the proactive career behaviour scale developed by Strauss *et al.* (2012). Each sub-scale consisted of three items. Sample items include: "I engage in career path planning" (career planning); "I develop knowledge and skill in tasks critical to my future work life" (proactive skill development); and "I am building a network of colleagues I can call on for support" (network building). All items were scored on a five-point scale anchored by 1 (strongly disagree) and 5 (strongly agree). Clements and Kamau (2018) in their study reported that the values of Cronbach's α for the career planning, proactive skill development and network building sub-scales were 0.89, 0.76 and 0.92, respectively. The values of Cronbach's α for the three sub-scales in the present study were 0.79, 0.64 and 0.81, respectively.

Results

Descriptive statistics

The means, standard deviations and correlations among the study variables are presented in Table II. Results reported in Table II showed that servant leadership was positively related to career planning ($r = 0.29, p < 0.01$), skill development ($r = 0.22, p < 0.01$) and networking behaviour ($r = 0.35, p < 0.01$). Furthermore, it was found that career planning ($r = 0.44, p < 0.01$), skill development ($r = 0.42, p < 0.01$) and networking behaviour ($r = 0.51, p < 0.01$) were positively correlated with perceived employability.

Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA)

Before testing the research hypotheses, a CFA was conducted by using LISREL 8.80 (Joreskog and Sorbom, 2006) to establish convergent and discriminant validity among the five study variables. In this analysis, the scale items linked to servant leadership, perceived employability, career planning, skill development and networking behaviour were used as manifest indicators of the latent constructs.

The fit of the hypothesised five-factor model was evaluated with the following four fit indices: model χ^2 , comparative fit index (CFI), Tucker–Lewis index (TLI) and root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA). In case of model χ^2 , an insignificant χ^2 value depicts a good model fit (Kline, 2005). However, this fit index is sensitive to sample size and

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	<i>M</i>	SD
1. Servant leadership	<i>0.86</i>					3.66	0.70
2. Perceived employability	0.25**	<i>0.84</i>				3.68	0.79
3. Career planning	0.29**	0.44**	<i>0.79</i>			3.89	0.71
4. Networking behaviour	0.35**	0.51**	0.45**	<i>0.81</i>		3.83	0.74
5. Skill development	0.22**	0.42**	0.49**	0.37**	<i>0.64</i>	4.11	0.58

Notes: $n = 176$. Cronbach's α reliabilities for observed variables are in italic in the diagonal. ** $p < 0.01$

Table II. Descriptive statistics and correlations among the study variables

therefore researchers suggest that it should always be used in conjunction with other fit indices to evaluate model fit (Vandenberg and Lance, 2000). For CFI and TLI, values of 0.95 and above are considered as indicating good fit (Hu and Bentler, 1999), while for RMSEA values below 0.08 signify an acceptable model fit (Williams *et al.*, 2009).

Results showed that the hypothesised five-factor model exhibited a good fit to the data: $\chi^2(142) = 232.96, p < 0.01$; CFI = 0.98; TLI = 0.98; and RMSEA = 0.05. The factor loadings and construct reliabilities for the latent variables are presented in Table III. The results reported in Table III revealed that factor loadings for all the scale items were greater than 0.50, which indicates that the five-factor model possessed adequate convergent validity (Hair *et al.*, 2010). Based on this evidence, all the items were retained for data analysis. In addition, results showed that construct reliabilities for the servant leadership, perceived employability, career planning and network building scales exceeded the threshold value of 0.70 (Hair *et al.*, 2010). However, for the proactive skill development scale, the construct reliability (0.64) was marginally less than the recommended value of 0.70.

Further analysis revealed that the corrected item to total correlations for this scale ranged from 0.39 to 0.48 with an average of 0.45. These items to total correlations were greater than the minimum value of 0.30 recommended by Cristobal *et al.* (2007). In short, these findings indicate that this scale was a fairly reliable measure of proactive skill development and therefore this variable was retained in the research model.

To evaluate the discriminant validity of the study measures, the fit of the five-factor model was compared to the fit of three alternate models. Results of the χ^2 difference test (Hu and Bentler, 1999) presented in Table IV showed that the hypothesised model provided a better fit to the data than all the alternate models. These findings provide evidence of discriminant validity among the five study variables.

Construct items	Factor loadings	Construct reliability
<i>Servant leadership</i>		0.86
SL1	0.69**	
SL2	0.77**	
SL3	0.62**	
SL4	0.73**	
SL5	0.78**	
SL6	0.54**	
SL7	0.62**	
<i>Perceived employability</i>		0.86
PE1	0.85**	
PE2	0.91**	
PE3	0.67**	
<i>Career planning</i>		0.79
CP1	0.80**	
CP2	0.81**	
CP3	0.62**	
<i>Network building</i>		0.81
NB1	0.81**	
NB2	0.77**	
NB3	0.71**	
<i>Proactive skill development</i>		0.64
PSD1	0.55**	
PSD2	0.58**	
PSD3	0.70**	

Table III. Reliability and convergent validity of the scales

Note: ** $p < 0.01$

Model	Factors	χ^2	df	$\Delta\chi^2$	Δ df	CFI	TLI	RMSEA
Hypothesised model	Five factors	232.96**	142	–	–	0.98	0.98	0.05
Model 1	Four factors (servant leadership and perceived employability merged into one factor)	505.15**	146	272.19**	4	0.89	0.87	0.11
Model 2	Three factors (career planning, networking behaviour and skill development merged into one factor)	349.01**	149	116.05**	7	0.95	0.95	0.07
Model 3	One factor (all items forced to load on a single factor)	774.56**	152	541.60**	10	0.78	0.76	0.15

Notes: CFI, comparative fit index; TLI, Tucker–Lewis index; RMSEA, root mean square error of approximation. ** $p < 0.01$

Table IV. Comparison of factor models

Testing of the research hypotheses

The research hypotheses were tested by conducting structural equation modelling (SEM) through LISREL 8.80. Results of SEM demonstrated that the research model depicted in Figure 1 exhibited a good fit to the data: $\chi^2(146) = 301.64$, $p < 0.01$; CFI = 0.96; TLI = 0.95; and RMSEA = 0.06. The fit of this fully mediated model was then compared to the fit of a partially mediated model, which contained a direct path from servant leadership to perceived employability. The fit of these two competing models was compared with the χ^2 difference test.

Results showed that although the partially mediated model provided an adequate fit to the data ($\chi^2(145) = 300.68$, $p < 0.01$; CFI = 0.96; TLI = 0.95; and RMSEA = 0.07), it failed to bring about a significant improvement in fit over the research model ($\Delta\chi^2(1) = 0.96$, $p > 0.05$). Moreover, the direct path from servant leadership to perceived employability was insignificant ($\beta = -0.09$, ns). Thus, in line with the rules of parsimony (James *et al.*, 2006), it can be concluded that the fully mediated model was more consistent with the present data and therefore it was chosen as the final model.

Examination of the paths in the fully mediated model (Figure 2) showed that servant leadership was positively related to career planning ($\beta = 0.41$, $p < 0.01$), skill development ($\beta = 0.35$, $p < 0.01$) and networking behaviour ($\beta = 0.46$, $p < 0.01$) and perceived employability ($\beta = 0.17$, $p < 0.05$), career planning ($\beta = 0.43$, $p < 0.01$) and skill development ($\beta = 0.24$, $p < 0.01$).

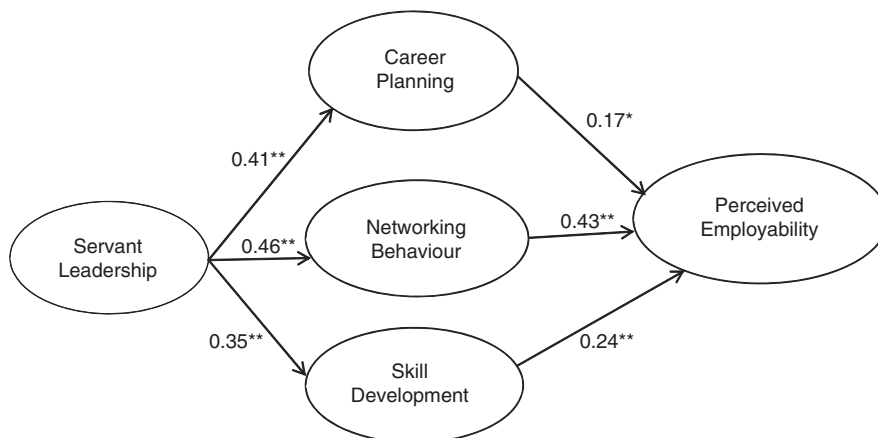


Figure 2. Estimated standardised path coefficients for the hypothesised model

Notes: For the sake of clarity, only structural relationships are shown. * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$

Thus, *H1–H3* were substantiated. Furthermore, it was found that career planning ($\beta = 0.17, p < 0.05$), skill development ($\beta = 0.24, p < 0.01$) and networking behaviour ($\beta = 0.43, p < 0.01$) were positively and significantly associated with perceived employability, thereby corroborating *H4–H6*. Finally, as noted above, the direct path from servant leadership to perceived employability was insignificant. This finding signified that the three proactive career behaviours fully mediated the link between servant leadership and perceived employability. Thus, the three mediation hypotheses (*H7–H9*) were also supported.

The significance of the indirect effects was ascertained by performing the bootstrapping procedure recommended by Preacher and Hayes (2008). This procedure generates standard errors and 95% bias-corrected confidence intervals (CIs) around the indirect effects. An indirect effect is considered significant if the 95% bias-corrected CI does not include a zero (Hayes, 2009). For this analysis, the 95% CIs were computed from 5,000 bootstrap samples.

Results revealed that the indirect effects of servant leadership on perceived employability through career planning, skill development and networking behaviour equalled 0.07 (95% CI [0.001, 0.18]), 0.08 (95% CI [0.01, 0.14]) and 0.20 (95% CI [0.04, 0.29]), respectively. Since the 95% bias-corrected CIs did not contain a 0, it can be concluded that the indirect effects of servant leadership on perceived employability via the three proactive career behaviours were significant. In sum, these results provided further support for the mediation hypotheses. The results of this study are summarised in Table V.

Discussion

Theoretical implications

The main aim of this study was to explore the effects of servant leadership on perceived employability and examine the mediating role of three proactive career behaviours, namely, career planning, skill development and network building in this relationship. Results of SEM showed that servant leadership was positively related to career planning, skill development and networking behaviour, which, in turn, were positively associated with perceived employability. Furthermore, it was found that the three proactive career behaviours fully mediated the effects of servant leadership on perceived employability.

This study makes two important contributions to the perceived employability literature. First, as discussed earlier, previous research has uncovered numerous antecedents of perceived employability (e.g. Wittekind *et al.*, 2010). However, the role of the leader in enhancing employees' employability has received comparatively less research attention.

Structural relationship	Estimated effect	Results
<i>Direct effects</i>		
<i>H1: SL–CP</i>	0.41**	<i>H1</i> (supported)
<i>H2: SL–NB</i>	0.46**	<i>H2</i> (supported)
<i>H3: SL–PSD</i>	0.35**	<i>H3</i> (supported)
<i>H4: CP–PE</i>	0.17*	<i>H4</i> (supported)
<i>H5: NB–PE</i>	0.43**	<i>H5</i> (supported)
<i>H6: PSD–PE</i>	0.24**	<i>H6</i> (supported)
<i>Indirect effects</i>		
<i>H7: SL–CP–PE</i>	0.07*	<i>H7</i> (supported)
<i>H8: SL–PSD–PE</i>	0.08*	<i>H8</i> (supported)
<i>H9: SL–NB–PE</i>	0.20**	<i>H9</i> (supported)

Table V. Summary of results

Notes: SL, servant leadership; PE, perceived employability; CP, career planning; NB, networking behaviour; PSD, proactive skill development. * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$

The present study addresses this gap by empirically establishing a link between servant leadership and perceived employability. The results of this study suggest that servant leaders are likely to have a significant impact on their followers' employability.

Second, by examining the mediating role of career planning, skill development and network building in the servant leadership–perceived employability relationship, this study provides useful insights into what servant leaders can actually do to improve the employability of their subordinates.

Results showed that servant leadership behaviours can induce employees to take charge of their own careers by engaging in proactive career behaviours such as career planning, skill development and network building (*H1–H3*). The empowering and developing behaviours exhibited by servant leaders have the potential to raise employees' self-efficacy and fulfil their need for autonomy, which, in turn, may inspire them to set clear career goals, improve their skills and build contacts both inside and outside the organisation. To the best of my knowledge, this is the first study, which has empirically established a connection between servant leadership and proactive career behaviours. These findings, however, tend to corroborate the view that positive forms of leadership can play a vital role in stimulating proactive work behaviours within the organisation (Strauss *et al.*, 2009).

The three proactive career behaviours, in turn, were found to be positively associated with perceived employability (*H4–H6*). These results are consistent with previous studies, which have demonstrated that employees' inclination to engage in developmental activities is likely to have a profound impact on their employability (Eby *et al.*, 2003; De Vos and Soens, 2008; Clements and Kamau, 2018).

Taken together, these findings indicate that servant leadership is indirectly related to perceived employability (*H7–H9*). Past studies have also reported similar findings. For instance, Van der Heijden and Bakker (2011) in their study showed that the relationship between transformational leadership and perceived employability was fully mediated by work-related flow. In sum, these results provide support for the notion that leaders are more likely to influence their followers' attitudes and behaviours indirectly by fostering a supportive and resourceful work environment (Ilies *et al.*, 2005; Laschinger and Fida, 2014).

Practical implications

This study has several practical implications for organisations and career development professionals. The results of this study revealed that servant leadership is likely to have a positive effect on perceived employability. Increasing perceived employability is important because it is a valuable personal resource, which can lead to several beneficial individual and organisational outcomes (Van der Heijden *et al.*, 2009). To foster servant leadership, organisations can contemplate doing two things. First, by using effective recruitment and selection strategies, they can strive to hire more servant leaders. Second, through suitable management development programmes, organizations should encourage their existing leaders to engage in servant leadership behaviours. Specifically, these programmes can focus on emphasising the importance of empowering employees, treating them fairly and fulfilling their developmental needs.

Furthermore, results showed that career planning, skill development and networking behaviour had significant unique effects on perceived employability. These findings imply that promoting proactive career behaviours in the workplace may prove to be an effective strategy for increasing workers' employability. Organisations can motivate employees to engage in such behaviours by providing support for their self-determination and by reinforcing their self-efficacy through appropriate training interventions (King, 2004).

However, organisations need to realise that increasing workers' employability can enhance their options for employment, which, in turn, may lead to higher turnover

rates (Nauta *et al.*, 2009). Thus, in order to retain highly employable workers, organisations should foster a climate of employability that offers these workers career and developmental opportunities, which are congruent with their career goals (Nauta *et al.*, 2009; Lu *et al.*, 2016).

Limitations and future research directions

Like all studies, this research was also limited by several factors. First, this study was cross-sectional and therefore causal inferences cannot be made. To overcome this limitation, future research in this area should try to replicate this study with a longitudinal research design because only longitudinal research can adequately disentangle cause and effect.

Second, data for this study were collected from a single organisation located in Pakistan. This raises the possibility that the findings of this study may not generalise well to other work contexts or cultures. Thus, in order to mitigate concerns regarding generalisability, future studies can strive to test the model developed in this paper in more diverse cultural and occupational settings.

Third, since all data were gathered through self-reports, it is possible that the findings of this study may have been distorted by common method variance (Podsakoff *et al.*, 2003). However, research evidence indicates that the common method variance problem is exaggerated, and it does not necessarily inflate relationships between the self-report measures (Spector, 2006).

To empirically assess the effects of common method variance, Harman's single factor test was conducted (Podsakoff *et al.*, 2003). Specifically, the fit of the hypothesised five-factor model was compared to the fit of a one-factor model, in which all indicators were forced to load on to a single factor (see Table II). Results showed that in contrast to the five-factor model, the one-factor model exhibited a poor fit to the data: $\Delta\chi^2(10) = 541.60$, $p < 0.01$; CFI = 0.78; TLI = 0.76; and RMSEA = 0.15. The better fit of the five-factor model suggests that common method variance did not have an adverse impact on the findings of this research (Seppala *et al.*, 2011). However, in order to avoid the detrimental effects linked to this problem, it is proposed that future studies should attempt to obtain data from different sources.

Fourth, the present study focused on examining the mediating role of proactive career behaviours in the servant leadership–perceived employability relationship. However, in order to acquire further insights into this relationship, future research can attempt to uncover other mediating variables, which have the potential to explain linkages between servant leadership and perceived employability.

Finally, this study used a one-dimensional measure of perceived employability and therefore did not differentiate between internal and external employability (e.g. De Cuyper *et al.*, 2012) and other dimensions of employability (e.g. Van der Heijde and Van der Heijden, 2006). Thus, an interesting avenue for future research could be to examine the relationship between servant leadership and different dimensions of perceived employability to determine how this leadership style relates to these dimensions.

Conclusion

This paper presents one of the first attempts to develop and test an integrated model that links servant leadership to perceived employability. Specifically, results of this study showed that servant leadership behaviours can enhance workers' employability by encouraging them to engage in proactive career behaviours. Thus, it is hoped that the findings of this study will inspire organisations and career development professionals to formulate strategies that focus on developing servant leaders.

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Further reading

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Appendix. Items included in research measures

Servant leadership (from Liden *et al.* (2015))

- (1) My boss can tell if something work-related is going wrong.
- (2) My boss makes my career development a priority.
- (3) I would seek help from my boss if I had a personal problem.
- (4) My boss emphasises the importance of giving back to the community.
- (5) My boss puts my best interests ahead of his/her own.
- (6) My boss gives me the freedom to handle difficult situations in the way that I feel is best.
- (7) My boss would NOT compromise ethical principles in order to achieve success.

Perceived employability (from De Vos and Soens (2008))

- (1) I believe I could easily obtain a comparable job with another employer.

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- (2) I believe I could easily obtain another job that is in line with my level of education and experience.
 - (3) I believe I could easily obtain another job that would give me a high level of satisfaction.

Proactive career behaviours (from Strauss *et al.* (2012))

Career planning

- (1) I am planning what I want to do in the next few years of my career.
- (2) I am thinking ahead to the next few years and plan what I need to do for my career.
- (3) I engage in career path planning.

Proactive skill development

- (1) I develop skills, which may not be needed so much now, but in future positions.
- (2) I gain experience in a variety of areas to increase my knowledge and skills.
- (3) I develop knowledge and skill in tasks critical to my future work life.

Network building

- (1) I am building a network of contacts or friendships with colleagues to obtain information about how to do my work or to determine what is expected of me.
- (2) I am building a network of contacts or friendships to provide me with help or advice that will further my work chances.
- (3) I am building a network of colleagues I can call on for support.

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