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**You care about me, but can I count on you? Applying a psychological contract perspective to investigate what makes employees willing to be internally employable**

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Note: The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author, [E.S.], upon reasonable request.

## Abstract

For this study, we adopted a psychological contract-based perspective to investigate whether the fulfillment of perceived developmental promises made to employees is positively related to their willingness to accept internal job-related changes when needed by the organization, a construct we refer to as the *willingness to be internally employable*. We also examined the role played by line managers in facilitating employees' willingness to be internally employable by fulfilling perceived developmental promises. We tested our conceptual model with data collected from ninety-eight recently hired employees in a Norwegian organization under an initiative emphasizing employee development. We found that developmental promise fulfillment is more important for employees' willingness to be internally employable in this context than any perceived provision of developmental inducements in isolation. Further, we found that employee perceptions of the developmental support provided by their line manager related positively to their willingness to be internally employable by way of developmental promise fulfillment; however, this was not the case with perceived developmental inducements. Our findings support the importance of developmental promise fulfillment in fostering employee willingness to be internally employable and the critical role played by line managers in fulfilling developmental promises that employees believe have been made by their organization.

*Keywords:* internal employability, employee willingness to be internally employable, psychological contracts, developmental promise fulfillment, developmental supervisor support

Developmental HRM is important in work contexts concerned with employees' internal employability. It provides employees with the knowledge and skills required to remain up-to-date with changing business needs (e.g., Clarke, 2013; Roehling, Cavanaugh, Moynihan, & Boswell, 2000). Employees who receive developmental HRM also perceive having more opportunities with their current employer, which contributes to organizational commitment during times of ongoing change (Akkermans, Tims, Beijer, & De Cuyper, 2019; Benson, 2006; Nelissen, Forrier, & Verbruggen, 2017). Moreover, perceived investment in developmental HRM relates positively to employees' openness to adapt to changing work requirements (Solberg & Dysvik, 2016). This willingness to accept internal job changes is critical for organizational flexibility (Nauta, Van Vianen, Van der Heijden, Van Dam, & Willemsen, 2009) and employees' own internal career management (Van Dam, 2004).

Social exchange theory (SET; Blau, 1964) is often applied to explain employees' positive responses to developmental HRM. In accordance with SET, investment in employee development "creates conditions where employees believe that their organizations value their contribution and care about their employability" (C. H. Lee & Bruvold, 2003, p. 981). As such, these investments should trigger employees' perceptions of having a social exchange relationship with their employer, thereby resulting in their felt obligation to reciprocate developmental HRM with the attitudes and work behaviors necessary for remaining internally employable (see Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005).

Yet, the few studies that have actually tested these mechanisms find little support for social exchange-based theorizing or report counterintuitive findings. Notably, Van Dam (2004) found a negative relationship between employee perceptions that the organization cares about them and their openness to adapt to changing work requirements. More recently, Solberg and Dysvik (2016) found that a positive relationship between perceived investment in employee development and employees' openness to adapt to changing work requirements was

not explained by perceptions of having a social exchange relationship with their employer. These findings suggest that perceiving that the organization cares about employees and their development may not suffice to explain the relationship between developmental HRM and internal employability outcomes, particularly the *willingness to be internally employable* by accepting internal job-related changes when needed by the organization.

One possible explanation resides in the nature of employee willingness to be internally employable. Compared to typical SET outcomes, including organizational commitment and job performance, the willingness to be internally employable reflects a proactive anticipation of business needs; in other words, employees are willing to make changes if they are needed by the organization (Fugate & Kinicki, 2008; Van Dam, 2004). It also supposes that employees generally accept a certain level of uncertainty (Strauss & Parker, 2018). Accordingly, the willingness to be internally employable may depend more on employees' perceptions that they can count on the organization to uphold its future commitments than on perceptions that the organization cares about them.

To explore this possibility, our study takes a different approach within SET by turning to the literature on psychological contracts (Rousseau, 1989, 1995). Psychological contract research distinguishes “promises” from “inducements” and emphasizes the importance of “promise fulfillment.” Promises reflect the support, opportunities, and rewards that employees believe the organization has pledged to them (Bankins, 2014; Coyle-Shapiro & Kessler, 2000; Rousseau, 1989). In contrast, inducements represent the support, opportunities, and rewards an organization actually provides to employees, as perceived by the employees (C. Lee, Liu, Rousseau, Hui, & Chen, 2011). Building on these ideas, promise fulfillment reflects the difference between what employees believe their organization has promised to them and what they perceive as being actually provided by their organization, i.e., between perceived promises and perceived inducements (Coyle-Shapiro & Kessler, 2000). In this literature,

employees are found to ascribe a stronger weight to promise fulfillment than to perceived inducements in isolation of perceived promises (Lambert, Edwards, & Cable, 2003; C. Lee et al., 2011). Unlike inducements, which in effect signal to employees that the organization cares about them, promise fulfillment also demonstrates that the organization is reliable and trustworthy, thus strengthening employee beliefs that they can count on the organization.

To our knowledge, no research has adopted a psychological contract-based approach to study employees' willingness to be internally employable, nor have any studies examined promise fulfillment as a mechanism to explain internal employability outcomes.<sup>1</sup> Recognizing this opportunity, and considering that psychological contracts emphasizing employee development are widely associated with work contexts that promote internal employability (e.g., Cavanaugh & Noe, 1999; Clarke, 2013; Kluytmans & Ott, 1999; Roehling et al., 2000; Sturges, Conway, Guest, & Liefoghe, 2005), *developmental promise fulfillment*<sup>2</sup> is examined as a focal mechanism to explain employee willingness to be internally employable. Consistent with psychological contract research, we predict that developmental promise fulfillment will be more important for employee willingness to be internally employable than perceived developmental inducements in isolation of perceived developmental promises.

In an effort to extend the practical implications of our research, we also consider contextual factors that could facilitate developmental promise fulfillment and, indirectly, employee willingness to be internally employable. Line managers should be important for developmental promise fulfillment (Dabos & Rousseau, 2004), particularly to the extent that they provide employees with developmental support. While other researchers have found that

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<sup>1</sup> We acknowledge that researchers have applied psychological contract theory to examine employees' *perceived employability* (i.e., self-perceived chances of employment) on the *external job market* in relation to perceived psychological contract promises and obligations (De Cuyper, Van der Heijden, & De Witte, 2011; Dries, Forrier, De Vos, & Pepermans, 2014; Van der Vaart, Linde, De Beer, & Cockeran, 2015).

<sup>2</sup> In line with Coyle-Shapiro and Kessler (2000), we view developmental promise fulfillment as the difference between the developmental promises employees perceive have been made to them by their organization and the developmental inducements they perceive they have received from the organization.

developmental support relates positively to employee willingness to be internally employable (Van Dam, 2004; van Harten, Knies, & Leisink, 2017), our study extends these findings by addressing how developmental support from line managers facilitates this outcome via developmental promise fulfillment. In doing so, our study expands our understanding of the role played by line managers in facilitating internal employability by enacting intended HRM practices (Kehoe & Han, 2020; Nishii & Wright, 2013), in particular those practices that employees believe have been promised to them. Figure 1 illustrates our research model.

== Insert Figure 1 about here ==

### **The willingness to be internally employable**

The willingness to be internally employable reflects employees' open mindedness toward their acceptance of internal job-related changes when needed by the organization. This is somewhat similar to the concept of employability orientation developed by Van Dam and colleagues (Nauta et al., 2009; Van Dam, 2004). Similar to employability orientation, the willingness to be internally employable reflects a psychological "input factor" that can increase a person's ability to maintain internal employability (Vanhercke, De Cuyper, Peeters, & De Witte, 2014). Indeed, employees who are willing to take on different jobs within the organization are more likely to do what is needed to remain internally employable, and therefore experience greater internal job opportunities (e.g., Forrier, Verbruggen, & De Cuyper, 2015; Fugate & Kinicki, 2008; Fugate, Kinicki, & Ashforth, 2004).

However, employability orientation has a broader scope than the willingness to be internally employable in that it also captures general attitudes toward self-development. Also, the label "orientation" suggests a more stable career preference or disposition that develops and operates independently from the specific organizational context (like, for example, a

boundaryless career orientation; Gubler, Arnold, & Coombs, 2014).<sup>3</sup> Although Van Dam (2004) originally described employability orientation as an attitude that can be influenced by both personal and contextual factors, more research views employees' openness towards internal job changes as a disposition inherent to employability (e.g., Forrier et al., 2015; Fugate & Kinicki, 2008; Vanhercke et al., 2014), possibly explaining why the construct remains understudied in the literature. In light of this background—and like other researchers who have also focused on the job-change component of employability orientation—we refer to employees' openness toward internal job-related changes in terms of their *willingness* rather than their orientation (e.g., van Harten et al., 2017; Wittekind, Raeder, & Grote, 2010).

### **Developmental promise fulfillment and employees' willingness to be internally employable**

Organizations increasingly promise developmental support and opportunities to facilitate a relational exchange with employees in work contexts where they are expected to remain internally employable by anticipating and preparing for changing tasks and roles (Cavanaugh & Noe, 1999; Dries et al., 2014; Guest & Rodrigues, 2012; Kluytmans & Ott, 1999; Sturges et al., 2005). Perceived developmental promises are likely to form during recruitment through exposure to organization communication and in dialogue with human resource officers and recruitment managers (Scholarios et al., 2008; Sullivan & Baruch, 2009). However, there is also evidence that these developmental promises, as perceived by employees, are not always fulfilled (Sturges & Guest, 2001). According to psychological contract theory and related research, this can have negative implications for employee willingness to remain internally employable.

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<sup>3</sup> We thank the editorial team for alerting us to this conceptual distinction.



The failure to fulfill perceived promises can be, among other factors, negatively related to employee intentions to remain with the organization (Lapointe, Vandenberghe, & Boudrias, 2013; Zhao, Wayne, Glibkowski, & Bravo, 2007). Therefore, it is logical to expect that when perceived developmental promises go unfulfilled, employees will be less interested in remaining internally employable and less willing to accept job-related changes when required by the organization. In contrast, developmental promise fulfillment should be positively associated with an interest in, and efforts made, to remain employable within the organization because this is the employees' perceived obligation to the organization. Accordingly, we hypothesize the following:

Hypothesis 1a: Developmental promise fulfillment will relate positively to employee willingness to be internally employable.

Moreover, we contend that developmental promise fulfillment plays a more central role in explaining employee willingness to be internally employable than perceptions of receiving developmental support and opportunities (i.e., inducements) from the organization in isolation of perceived developmental promises. This is because employee willingness to be internally employable reflects a more proactive anticipation of business needs (Fugate & Kinicki, 2008; Fugate et al., 2004; Van Dam, 2004) than other more general SET outcomes. Employee willingness to be internally employable involves—like other proactive constructs—certain self-initiated and future-oriented cognitive-motivational mechanisms and behaviors (Cai, Parker, Chen, & Lam, 2019; Crant, 2000; Parker, Williams, & Turner, 2006). The willingness to change based on the needs of the organization also involves some risks for employees. For example, those who are willing to be internally employable are also found to take more proactive approaches to their own preparedness and career development (Solberg & Dysvik, 2016; Van Dam, 2004). This is risky because it is based on uncertain predictions about what competencies or job roles will be of value to the organization in the future (Strauss

& Parker, 2018). For employees to display a willingness to be internally employable, they may need to perceive that the organization not only cares about employability but also can be counted upon to uphold its commitments in the future.

When employees perceive that their employer provides them with developmental support and opportunities (i.e., inducements), this should signal that the organization cares about employees, thus facilitating a perceived social exchange relationship (Solberg & Dysvik, 2016). In contrast, developmental promise fulfillment increases the perceived odds that promises made about employee development will also be fulfilled in the future (C. Lee et al., 2011). Accordingly, developmental promise fulfillment gives employees a reason to put their trust in the organization and commit to engaging in the activities needed to remain important and relevant to the organization (C. Lee et al., 2011) even when these activities may involve some personal risk (Cai et al., 2019; Crant, 2000; Parker et al., 2006). Drawing from psychological contract theory and research, we expect that this trust in the organization, as reinforced by fulfilled developmental promises, will strengthen employees' propensity to reciprocate by displaying the willingness to be internally employable to a greater extent than the perception of receiving developmental inducements in isolation of perceived promises. Accordingly, we hypothesize the following:

Hypothesis 1b: Developmental promise fulfillment will relate more positively to employee willingness to be internally employable than to employees' perceptions of developmental inducements per se.

### **Perceived developmental support, developmental promise fulfillment, and the willingness to be internally employable**

Line managers play an important role in interpreting HRM policies and signals from the upper levels of an organization and in conveying this information to their employees through communication, interactions, and resource allocation (Townsend, Wilkinson, Allan,

& Bamber, 2012). In this role, line managers also translate the organization's intended HRM into the actual HRM practices experienced by employees upon their enactment (Nishii & Wright, 2013; Purcell & Hutchinson, 2007). The role of line managers when implementing intended developmental HRM and their influence on how these practices are perceived by employees is particularly important (Kuvaas & Dysvik, 2010). Line managers are well positioned to facilitate developmental HRM in a way that is relevant for employees, because they know employee strengths, interests, and developmental needs (Dysvik & Kuvaas, 2012).

Based on our understanding of the line manager's role in enacting intended HRM, we contend that when the organization make promises to employees about their development, line managers play a central role in fulfilling these promises. In this regard, research on developmental "i-deals" shows that line managers customize employees' opportunities to develop new skills and competencies as part of their efforts to fulfill developmental promises (Hornung, Rousseau, & Glaser, 2009). Accordingly, line managers who offer general developmental support—as reflected in their provision of developmental guidance, feedback, and learning opportunities (e.g., Rafferty & Griffin, 2006)—should contribute to the fulfillment of developmental promises perceived by employees and, in turn, to their greater willingness to be internally employable.

While developmental support has been found to relate positively with employee willingness to accept internal job changes in previous research (van Harten, Knies, & Leisink, 2016), we expand on these findings by predicting that developmental promise fulfillment explains the relationship between developmental support and employee willingness to be internally employable. In line with earlier theorizing, we also contend that the indirect relationship between developmental support, developmental promise fulfillment, and willingness to be internally employable will be stronger than the indirect relationship

mediated by employee perceptions of receiving developmental inducements per se.

Accordingly, we hypothesize the following:

Hypothesis 2a: Developmental support will be positively related to willingness to be internally employable by way of increases in developmental promise fulfillment.

Hypothesis 2b: The indirect relationship between developmental support, developmental promise fulfillment, and willingness to be internally employable *will be stronger* than the indirect relationship between developmental support, perceived developmental inducements, and willingness to be internally employable.

## **Method**

### ***Organizational context***

We tested our hypotheses with data collected from a sample of employees working for the largest retail and industrial supplier of agricultural technology and equipment in Norway. In 2015, the organization launched a new employer branding campaign aimed at attracting, developing, and retaining a workforce capable of performing in line with strategic goals related to sustainability, innovation, and customer focus. The campaign emphasized the organization as a place to engage in exciting work projects with opportunities for both professional development and personal growth. Developmental opportunities were emphasized across all levels and for every position. Efforts were made to disseminate the details of this new campaign both internally and externally. In particular, the organization's online job portal, job announcements, and recruitment materials were updated to reflect the new campaign that ultimately corresponded with a sizeable expansion of the workforce. When we conducted the present study in early 2018, the organization had grown by more than 200

employees since the initiation of the employer branding campaign in 2015, thereby constituting a total headcount increase of approximately 15%.

### ***Procedure and sample***

Two executive students collected the data as part of a class project that was closely supervised by one of the study's authors. One of the students also served as a human resources manager in the organization. At the time of the study, we identified 218 employees with characteristics most relevant to the scope of our research. In particular, we only selected employees who had been with the organization between three months and two years. The two-year time period corresponded to the length of time the employer's branding campaign emphasizing developmental promises had been leveraged in the recruitment process. Although the developmental promises made during recruitment would be particularly salient to new hires (employees working with the organization for less than one year), we expected to find that all employees hired and socialized during the campaign period would have at least perceived some developmental promises. Extending the sample beyond new hires also allowed us to capture more variation in developmental promise fulfillment, particularly as the fulfillment of developmental promises is likely to take time or fluctuate over time. For example, employees might have perceived high levels of developmental opportunities early in their tenure because of initiatives related to new-hire orientation but later found that these opportunities leveled off after the initial hiring phase. Indeed, previous research has shown that newcomers' perceptions of the workplace continue to evolve throughout the first twenty-one months (Jokisaari & Nurmi, 2009). We also limited the selection of employees to those with tenure greater than three months in order to ensure that respondents had accumulated sufficient experience with the organization and their supervisors in order to answer questions related to developmental inducements and developmental supervisor support. We excluded employees in temporary and apprentice positions from the sample as they were expected to

have more short-term perspectives on the employment relationship and were engaged in different training and developmental paths.

We distributed surveys to the 218 selected employees electronically by e-mail using an Internet-based tool (Questback) in February 2018. In the cover letter, we informed employees about the nature of the questionnaire, including the procedures used to protect their anonymity. Their participation was voluntary, and they could end their participation at any time. We omitted questions about job placement or specific business departments out of consideration for the participants' anonymity because, in some cases, this information could readily identify individual respondents. We distributed the survey with a two-week response deadline. During this period, we sent also two reminders at four-day intervals.

Out of the 218 employees invited to take the survey, 107 responded, representing a 49% response rate. For gender, 29% were women and 71% were men. For education, 6% had completed lower secondary school, 39% had completed upper secondary school, 16% held a vocational degree, 22% had completed a bachelor's degree or equivalent, and 17% held a master's degree or higher. The respondents were split between having under 1 year of organizational tenure (44%) and tenure between 1 to 2 years (56%). Concerning age, 22% were between 20–29 years, 30% were between 30–39 years, 38% were between 40–49 years, and 10% were between 50–59 years.

### ***Measures***

All survey measures can be found in the Appendix.

We operationalized developmental promise fulfillment by computing the difference between the developmental promises employees perceived had been made to them by their organization and the developmental inducements they perceived they had received from the organization. These procedures followed those outlined by Coyle-Shapiro and Kessler (2000) for computing promise fulfillment. Specifically, we first asked employees to indicate the

extent to which they felt that the organization had promised them the opportunity to develop their skills at work, the opportunity to develop both personally and professionally within the organization, and the opportunity to participate in exciting work tasks from which they could learn. A separate three-item measure then asked to what extent they felt the organization had provided them with each dimension of developmental opportunity since their employment date. We created the measurement items based on job announcements and other employee-oriented communiques issued by the organization. Respondents replied to all items on 5-point Likert scales ranging from 1 (*not at all*) to 5 (*very much*). We computed the difference between the mean perceived developmental promise score and the mean perceived developmental inducement score to indicate the extent to which developmental promises were fulfilled (Coyle-Shapiro & Kessler, 2000).

Based on the recommendation of an anonymous expert reviewer, we established a cutoff point for perceived developmental promises and then removed cases with values below that point. By doing so, cases where both perceived developmental promises and perceived developmental inducements were low—thus indicating low levels of developmental promise fulfillment—were not included in the analyses. The cutoff value was set at 3.0. Anything below this would indicate that the respondent had not perceived developmental promises to any reasonable degree. The difference scores after excluding these cases ranged from -2.33 to 1.00, where negative scores indicated that developmental promises were not fulfilled, positive scores indicated developmental promises were overfulfilled, and a score of zero indicated perfect fulfillment of developmental promises. Of the ninety-eight relevant cases, fifty-one had scores of zero that indicated perfect fulfillment. Twenty-four cases had negative scores indicating unfulfilled developmental promises, whereas sixteen cases had positive scores that indicated overfulfillment.

We measured developmental support with seven items developed and validated in Norway by Lai and colleagues (Lai, 2011; Lai & Kapstad, 2009) that are based on the measure developed by Greenhaus, Parasuraman, and Wormley (1990). Items in the measure were adapted to focus on developmental support rather than career support. For example, one item from Greenhaus et al., “My line manager cares about whether or not I achieve my career goals” (p. 85) was modified to read, “My line manager cares about whether or not I achieve my developmental goals.” Accordingly, items reflected line manager support specifically aimed at understanding developmental needs and goals, providing helpful feedback, and providing challenges and opportunities where employees could develop and strengthen their knowledge and skills. Item responses were made on 5-point Likert scales ranging from 1 (*highly disagree*) to 5 (*highly agree*).

Employee willingness to be internally employable was measured with five items developed in previous research (Solberg & Lai, 2016) to reflect employee willingness to accept internal job-related changes if these changes were needed by the organization. The measure of employability orientation developed by Van Dam (2004) provided a reference point for these new items. The items were intentionally crafted to measure employee *willingness* to accept position and task changes in situations where such changes would most likely occur, such as during the introduction of new technologies or procedures and changes to organizational structure and strategies (Schyns, 2004). Respondents replied to these items on 5-point Likert scales ranging from 1 (*highly disagree*) to 5 (*highly agree*).

In addition to its descriptive purposes, we also considered organizational tenure as a possible control variable. It is plausible to assume that tenure affects the extent to which employees perceive that their supervisor provides developmental support or the extent to which developmental promises are fulfilled. We captured tenure as an ordinal variable where 1 represented *tenure under one year* and 2 represented *tenure between one to two years*. We



also considered respondent age as a potential control variable because previous research has shown that older workers may systematically perceive less developmental opportunities than younger workers (Jung & Takeuchi, 2018; Ng & Feldman, 2012). We measured age with an ordinal variable, where 1 represented *between 20–29 years old*, 2 *between 30–39 years old*, 3 *between 40–49 years old*, 5 *between 50–59 years old*, and 6 *between 60–69 years old*.

### ***Analysis***

We first conducted a principal component analysis to ensure convergent and discriminant validity of all measurement items (Farrell, 2010). We then tested the hypotheses using SPSS (version 25). To test the direct effect hypotheses, we regressed the dependent variable willingness to be internally employable separately onto developmental promise fulfillment and then perceived developmental inducements. We tested the hypotheses predicting mediation using the PROCESS macro for SPSS (version 3.2.01; [www.afhayes.com](http://www.afhayes.com)). The PROCESS macro allows for simultaneous testing of the mediation model and also incorporates bootstrapping techniques for estimating indirect effects that are currently preferred by methodologists over causal steps and Sobel test strategies (Hayes, 2013; Preacher & Hayes, 2004). We specified the model to conduct bootstrapping with 5,000 resamples to generate the 95% bias-corrected confidence interval of the indirect effect. Mediation is supported if the bias-corrected confidence interval for the indirect effect excludes zero.

### ***Results***

The results of the principle component analysis revealed that all items loaded discretely onto their respective factors, and all loadings were above .50. Subsequent tests of scale reliability indicated a Cronbach's alpha above .70 for all measures. Accordingly, we computed variables using all respective measurement items. Table 1 shows the mean, standard deviation, and correlations for the study variables. Cronbach's alpha values

indicating the scale reliability are shown in parentheses. As we found that organizational tenure and age had no significant correlation with developmental promise fulfillment, perceived developmental inducements, or willingness to be internally employable, they were not included in the regression analysis (Becker et al., 2016).

== Insert Table 1 about here ==

In testing our hypotheses, we first examined the direct relationship between developmental promise fulfillment and employee willingness to be internally employable (Hypothesis 1a). As explained in the measures section, this analysis only included cases where the computed mean scores of the developmental promise items were equal to or greater than 3.00 ( $N = 98$ ). The regression analysis based on this dataset showed there was a significant positive relationship between developmental promise fulfillment and the willingness to be internally employable ( $B = .21, SE = .09, p < .05$ ). Accordingly, Hypothesis 1a was supported. Further, the positive relationship between developmental promise fulfillment and employees' willingness to be internally employable was stronger than the relationship found between perceived developmental inducements and the willingness to be internally employable, for which findings indicated a nonsignificant relationship ( $B = .12, SE = .07, p = .11$ ). Accordingly, Hypothesis 1b was also supported.

Hypothesis 2a predicted that developmental promise fulfillment would mediate a positive relationship between perceived developmental supervisor support and employee willingness to be internally employable. Results of the mediation analysis conducted in PROCESS showed that developmental supervisor support was significantly and positively related to developmental promise fulfillment ( $B = .23, SE = .07, p > .01$ ) as anticipated. Further, the indirect effect was positive and significant ( $B = .05, SE = .03, 95\% CI = [.01, .10]$ ) as indicated by a bootstrapped confidence interval that did not include zero. Accordingly, Hypothesis 2a was supported. We then tested a second mediation model in

PROCESS that specified perceived developmental inducements as the mediator. In this model, we found perceived developmental supervisor support to have a strong, positive relationship with employees' perceptions of developmental inducements ( $B = .56, SE = .07, p > .001$ ). However, the indirect effect between perceived developmental supervisor support and employee willingness to be internally employable, as mediated by perceived developmental inducements, was not significant, as indicated by a bootstrapped confidence interval that included zero ( $B = .05, SE = .06, 95\% CI = [-.07, .15]$ ). Accordingly, Hypothesis 2b was also supported.

## **Discussion**

This study aimed to contribute to a better understanding of the mechanisms that underlie developmental HRM and internal employability outcomes, notably employee willingness to be internally employable. Psychological contract theory and research suggest that promise fulfillment is more impactful than the support, opportunities, and rewards employees perceive receiving from their organization (i.e., inducements) in isolation of perceived promises (Coyle-Shapiro & Kessler, 2000; Lambert et al., 2003; Lee et al., 2011; Rousseau, 1989). Based on this reasoning, we hypothesized and subsequently found that developmental promise fulfillment related significantly and positively to employees' willingness to be internally employable; however, perceived developmental inducements in isolation did not.

Our study addressed suggestions made in other research to explore alternative mechanisms that could underlie employees' willingness to accept internal, job-related changes when needed by the organization (Solberg & Dysvik, 2016). As mentioned in the introduction, earlier research by Van Dam (2004) and Solberg and Dysvik (2016) both suggest that believing that the organization cares about employees (i.e., perceived organizational support; Eisenberger, Huntington, Hutchison, & Sowa, 1986) and other SET-

based mechanisms are not sufficient for explaining this important internal employability input (Vanhercke et al., 2014). In our study, perceived developmental inducements, which signal that the organization cares about internal employability (C. H. Lee & Bruvold, 2003), and elicit perceptions of a social exchange relationship (Solberg & Dysvik, 2016), did not relate significantly to employee willingness to be internally employable in itself. It was only when perceived developmental inducements were considered in relation to perceived developmental promises, as captured by developmental promise fulfilment (Coyle-Shapiro & Kessler, 2000), that a positive relationship took shape. Our findings therefore align with our contentions that signals that the organization can be counted on are more important than signals implying that the organization cares about employees when the outcome of interest is employee willingness to be internally employable.

Another key finding of our research is that perceived developmental support had a positive and indirect relationship with employee willingness to be internally employable by way of developmental promise fulfillment; however, this was not the case with perceived developmental inducements. This supports the important role that line managers play in satisfying the psychological contract that exists between employees and their organization (Dabos & Rousseau, 2004). It is also interesting to connect these findings to the literature on HRM devolution<sup>4</sup> concerning explanations for the causal chain between the organization's intended HRM practices and employee responses to the HRM practices they perceive at work (Purcell & Hutchinson, 2007). In line with research on HRM devolution, our findings reinforce the important role played by line managers during the enactment of developmental HRM. Employees who perceived the receipt of developmental support from their line managers also perceived the receipt of developmental inducements. However, our findings

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<sup>4</sup> This refers to “the delegation of the responsibility for implementing HR practices to line managers outside the HR function” (Kehoe & Han, 2020, p. 114)

also emphasize the line managers' responsibility for enacting intended HRM *as perceived by employees* in order for the intended HRM to have a positive influence on desired employee attitudes and behavior. The causal chain depicted in HRM devolution literature implies that the organization's intended HRM practices are not directly observable by employees.

However, psychological contract theory and related studies suggest that employees are likely to have beliefs about the organization's intended inducements and that these beliefs stem, among other factors, from the organization's practices and its agents (Rousseau, 1995; Rousseau, Hansen, & Tomprou, 2018). Our findings therefore highlight the importance of alignment between the promises that employees perceive that the organization has made and the supervisors' efforts to fulfill them.

The positive relationship between developmental promise fulfillment and willingness to be internally employable also contributes to research indicating the need to mitigate concerns over the employability paradox (the belief that investments made to increase employability can also increase the risk of turnover; e.g., Nelissen et al., 2017). Notably, our findings show that the employability paradox is less likely to hold weight if the developmental investments made in employees fulfill or overfulfill the developmental promises employees perceive as being made to them by the organization. However, we only assume that the willingness to be internally employable reflects the employees' longer-term aspirations regarding their employment with the organization and thus their intentions to remain employed there in the future even if job-related changes are needed. Future research should apply longitudinal designs to examine the relationship between developmental promise fulfillment, the willingness to be internally employable, and turnover or continued employment when job changes are necessary in order to test and lend support for these assumptions.

Arguably more problematic than possible turnover, however, is that in the absence of employees who are willing to be internally employable, administrators can find themselves in situations where it is difficult to assign employees to new tasks and roles. Likewise, employees may resist changes that are necessary to remain competitive (Nauta et al., 2009). For employees, their unwillingness to be internally employable can also lead to career stagnation (Nauta et al., 2009) or job insecurity in times of change, both of which are detrimental to one's well-being (Wittekind et al., 2010). We posit that the willingness to be internally employable is beneficial for organizations; therefore, this should be enhanced and facilitated even if it requires risky investments. In fact, we suggest that expecting employees to risk personal changes as business needs evolve despite the inherent uncertainty (Strauss & Parker, 2018) could be considered dependent on the organization's own willingness to risk investments in employee development (c.f., Roehling et al., 2000). Accordingly, managers should be less concerned with the implications of developmental investments on employee turnover and more concerned with the negative implications that arise when developmental investments are not provided (Nauta et al., 2009), particularly in cases when employees believe they have been offered developmental promises.

### ***Limitations***

The results of the present study should be viewed in light of several limitations, one of which is the significant inability to support causal claims. By using cross-sectional data, we were unable to draw inferences of causality or rule out the possibility of reverse causality between study variables (Pedhazur & Schmelkin, 1991; Shadish, Cook, & Campbell, 2002). For example, it is possible that employees who display greater willingness to be internally employable are also more likely to perceive developmental promises and inducements at the same level; therefore, they also rate their line managers as displaying higher levels of developmental support. Further, the data could be inflated by single-source bias because we

used employee responses to collect data for all study variables. By their very nature, the study variables reflect perceptions and attitudes that call for subjective, self-rated measures.

However, it is possible that development support may be measured more objectively in the future, for example, by using time spent or resources allocated to employee development, or by using a different source like the supervisors themselves. This study is also limited in that it includes only relatively new employees in one organization where developmental promises were intentionally offered and emphasized during recruitment and socialization. This may limit the generalizability of findings to organizations where developmental promises are not so explicit. To support the generalizability of findings, it is important for future researchers to investigate developmental promise fulfillment in relation to willingness to be internally employable in and between different types of organizations or among employees with substantially different organizational tenure.

### ***Practical implications***

Our findings indicate that organizations should be concerned with fulfilling the developmental promises that their employees perceive as having been made to them if they seek to facilitate employee willingness to be internally employable. Also, developmental support from line managers is important for fulfilling developmental promises. Accordingly, if developmental promises are actively leveraged to attract, recruit, and motivate employees, organizations should ensure that line managers are sufficiently informed of these intentions and trained to be capable of delivering the level of support promised (Bos-Nehles, Van Riemsdijk, & Kees Looise, 2013). Organizations can improve the ability of line managers to provide developmental support via training or with the help of senior management, external coaches, and mentors. Moreover, developmental support can be facilitated by the visibility and availability of formalized developmental HRM policies and practices in the organization. Practices such as developmental performance appraisal (Boswell & Boudreau, 2002) and job

enrichment programs (Hackman & Oldham, 1976; Herzberg, 1968) like job rotation opportunities could be helpful in signaling to line managers that the development of employees is not only important but expected within the organization (Bowen & Ostroff, 2004; Townsend et al., 2012). These practices would also enable line managers to provide development support to their employees. However, while the structural elements of developmental HRM are important, research indicates that granting line managers the autonomy to customize work assignments and other developmental opportunities based on individual needs and goals (i.e., developmental i-deals; Hornung et al., 2009) is also likely to be important for putting intended developmental HRM policies into practice (Kuvaas, Dysvik, & Buch, 2014).

## **Conclusion**

In this study, we adopted a psychological contract-based perspective to investigate whether developmental promise fulfillment was important for employee willingness to be internally employable in work contexts that emphasize development as part of the employer-employee exchange. We found that developmental promise fulfillment related positively to employee willingness to be internally employable but not to perceived developmental inducements in isolation of perceived promises. This reinforced our expectation that signals showing that an organization can be counted on are more important for employees' willingness to be internally employable in this context than signals suggesting that the organization cares about employees or their internal employability. Further, we found that employee perceptions of developmental support related positively to their willingness to be internally employable indirectly, by way of increased developmental promise fulfillment. Our findings contribute to a better understanding of why and when perceived investment in developmental HRM relates to employee willingness to be internally employable. Our study also contributes to a better understanding of the critical role played by line managers in



facilitating developmental promise fulfillment by enacting the developmental intentions communicated by the organization.

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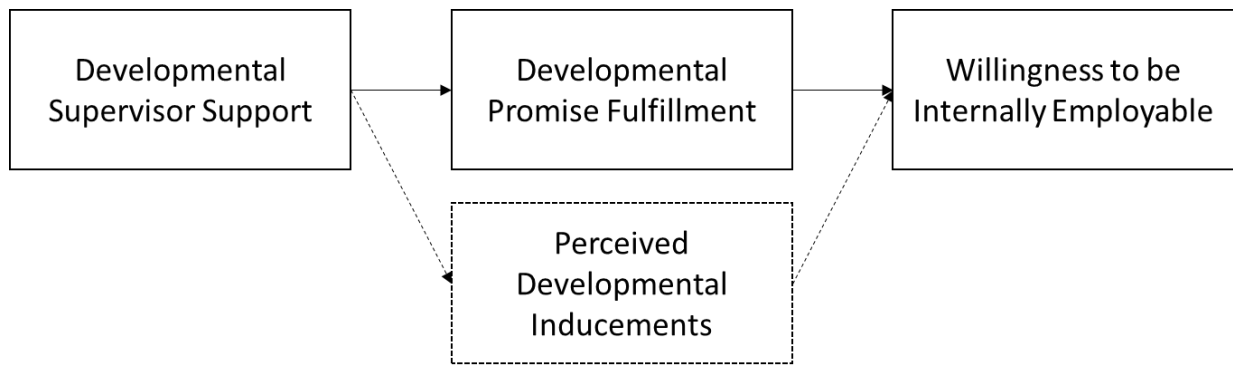
**APPENDIX**

**Factor Loadings from the Principal Components Analysis with Promax Rotation**

Items	1	2	3
DPF1: To what extent has your organization promised to provide you with the opportunity to develop your skills at work? – To what extent do you believe your organization has provided you with the opportunity to develop your skills at work?			.79
DPF2: To what extent has your organization promised to provide you with the opportunity to develop both personally and professionally within the organization? – To what extent do you believe your organization has provided you with the opportunity to develop both personally and professionally within the organization?			.93
DPF3: To what extent has your organization promised to provide you with the opportunity to get exciting work tasks that you can learn from? – To what extent do you believe your organization has provided you with the opportunity to get exciting work tasks that you can learn from?			.72
DSS1: My immediate supervisor takes time to understand my needs and wishes for further development.	.88		
DSS2: My immediate supervisor cares about whether or not I achieve my developmental goals.	.89		
DSS3: My immediate supervisor gives me helpful feedback about my performance.	.81		
DSS4: My immediate supervisor gives me helpful advice and support to improve my work performance.	.80		
DSS5: My immediate supervisor gives me challenges that develop and strengthen my knowledge.	.74		
DSS6: My immediate supervisor gives me the opportunity to participate in projects that increase my work skills.	.78		
DSS7: My immediate supervisor gives me the support I need based on my needs and goals.	.89		
WIE1: If there is no longer a need for what I do today, I am willing to take on new work tasks.		.78	
WIE2: I am willing to do things differently than I do them now if my leader or the organization wants me to.		.87	
WIE3: If we were to be organized in another way, I am willing to work with other tasks than I perform today.		.84	
WIE4: If we were to get new technology/IT solutions, I am willing to adapt the way I work to accommodate them.		.76	
WIE5: I am willing to accept new tasks or responsibilities at work if circumstances demand it.		.86	

DPF = Developmental promise fulfillment  
DSS= Developmental supervisor support  
WIE = Willingness to be internally employable

*Figure 1. Research model*



**Table 1. Descriptive Statistics, Correlations and Reliability Coefficients**

<b>Variables</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>S.D.</b>	<b>1.</b>	<b>2.</b>	<b>3.</b>	<b>4.</b>	<b>5.</b>	<b>6.</b>
1. Organizational tenure								
2. Age			.13					
3. Developmental supervisor support	3.72	.78	-.02	-.06	(.92)			
4. Developmental promise fulfillment	-.17	.56	.16	.13	.32**			
5. Perceived developmental inducements	3.90	.71	.08	-.14	.62**	.58**	(.88)	
6. Willingness to be internally employable	4.30	.52	.03	.13	.13	.23*	.16	(.88)

*N*=98.

\*\*  $p < .01$ .

Cronbach's alpha in parentheses indicating scale reliability