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# **Employability and Career Success of Fresh Graduates** in Boundaryless Career Environment

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#### **Abstract**

In a boundaryless career environment, industrial restructuring and the flattening of organizational hierarchies have led to a decline in career stability, making graduate employment an important social issue. Based on a sample of 1,000 fresh graduates, this study explores the impact mechanism of employability (EM) on career success (CS) and the mediating role of career self-efficacy (SE). The results show that EM positively affects CS ( $\beta$ =0.561, p<0.001), with SE partially mediating this relationship ( $\beta$ =0.127, p<0.001). These findings highlight the crucial role of employability and psychological capital in career development and provide empirical support and practical recommendations for enhancing graduates' employability.

Keywords: Employability; Career Success; Career self-efficacy;

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## 1.0 Introduction

The boundaryless career, as an emerging career paradigm, emphasizes that individuals are no longer restricted to a single organization but achieve self-fulfillment through inter-organizational, cross-industry, and even cross-regional career mobility (Arthur & Rousseau, 2001). This trend is particularly prominent among young professionals entering the workforce, with an increasing turnover rate in the first year of employment observed in several countries (Scott et al., 2021). According to data from the independent social research institute Mycos, fresh graduates in China change jobs an average of 1.7 times within the first year of entering the job market, with 23.6% switching jobs three or more times within a year. However, frequent career transitions do not necessarily lead to high-quality career development. Instead, they may result in a decline in career identity, skill fragmentation, and unclear career development goals, posing potential risks (Wu et al., 2020). In a highly dynamic job market, employability serves as a key mechanism that enhances career success through the effect of resource accumulation (Fugate et al., 2021). We argue that graduates with higher employability are more capable of adapting to career transitions, maintaining competitiveness in a dynamic environment, and achieving more stable career development. Therefore, exploring the relationship between employability and career success among fresh graduates is not only significant in academic research but also provides valuable insights for career guidance and career development.

Research previous has called for a more detailed distinction of the multidimensional structure of employability, evolving from a traditional single-skill approach to a comprehensive framework encompassing personal adaptability, career identity, human capital, and

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social capital (Heijde & Van Der Heijden, 2006). While existing studies have demonstrated that these four dimensions positively contribute to individual career success (Bargsted et al., 2021), most research has examined these factors independently, leaving their potential synergistic relationships uncertain.

In a rapidly changing job market, graduates must maintain long-term employability not only by acquiring essential knowledge and skills to meet current and future labor demands (Fugate et al., 2021), but also by developing proactive career management skills to effectively plan and adjust their career trajectories (Groysberg et al., 2019). Studies have shown that individuals with higher employability and clear career planning tend to achieve significantly greater career success (Martini & Cavenago, 2017). However, existing research has primarily focused on the direct impact of employability on career success, with limited exploration of the psychological mechanisms involved, particularly the role of individual cognitive factors in this process.

Self-efficacy is a critical psychological variable influencing individual career development, and higher employability is often accompanied by stronger career self-efficacy (Kocak & Ural, 2023). Meanwhile, individuals with high career self-efficacy are more likely to adopt proactive career development strategies and achieve greater career success (Zamroni et al., 2022). This suggests that self-efficacy not only affects individuals' adaptability in the labor market but may also play a key mediating role in the relationship between employability and career success. However, it remains unclear how different dimensions of employability indirectly influence career success through career self-efficacy.

As a summary, although existing studies have addressed aspects related to employability and career success, there are still research gaps, especially in terms of the psychological mediating mechanisms between different dimensions of employability and career success. To address this gap, this study aims to explicitly examine the relationship between employability (including career adaptability, career identity, social capital, and human capital) and career self-efficacy, and further explore whether career self-efficacy plays a mediating role between employability and career success. By conceptualizing and operationalizing the relevant variables, this study seeks to reveal the key mechanisms underlying career success among recent graduates, providing valuable references for academic research in this field as well as for career counseling and career development practices.

Based on the above theoretical framework, this study proposes and tests the hypothesis that employability, defined as career adaptability, career identity, social capital, and human capital (Spurk et al., 2019) is associated with higher career self-efficacy, thereby promoting career success.

# 2.0 Literature Review

## 2.1 The Relationship Between Employability and Career Success

Employability consists of four dimensions: personal adaptability, career identity, human capital, and social capital. Personal adaptability is not only reflected in adjusting to the social environment but also in coping with workplace changes and realizing long-term career development potential (De Vos et al., 2020). Higher personal adaptability enhances graduates' employability, facilitates their integration into the workplace, improves career stability, and promotes career success (Ding, 2019).

Career identity refers to the process by which individuals gradually develop and define their professional roles in the early stages of their careers, as well as their sense of identification with their chosen profession (Ding, 2019). Individuals with strong career identities typically have clearer career goals and greater sense of self-worth and gain social recognition in the process of achieving their career objectives (Werner & Hochman, 2019). Research indicates that high career identity enhances employees' work engagement and productivity (Wu et al., 2020) and serves as a key driver of career success (Dan et al., 2018).

Human capital encompasses the professional knowledge, work experience, and skills accumulated throughout a career (Cheng, 2016). It enables individuals to plan career paths more accurately, predict job opportunities, and acquire relevant information, thereby enhancing career competitiveness (Smale et al., 2019). At higher levels of career success, academic background and educational capital become more significant and homogeneous in competitive environments.

Social capital originates from personal and professional networks, it accumulates resources over time. Strong social capital is also linked to lower turnover rates and higher organizational loyalty (Moynihan & Pandey, 2008).

Although research supports the positive impact of these four employability dimensions on career success, their influence may vary across different career stages. Studies consistently suggest that employability is a key determinant of career success and maintains at least a moderate correlation with career outcomes (Ayoobzadeh, 2022).

Hypothesis 1a: Personal adaptability is positively related to career success.

Hypothesis 1b: Career identity is positively related to career success.

Hypothesis 1°: Human capital is positively related to career success.

Hypothesis 1d: Social capital is positively related to career success.

#### 2.2 The Relationship Between Employability and Career Self-efficacy

Career self-efficacy refers to an individual's confidence in their ability to complete professional tasks, overcome career challenges, and achieve career goals during their career development. This concept originates from self-efficacy theory, emphasizing an individual's subjective perception of their professional capabilities and their significant impact on career decision-making, career adaptability, and career success. Individuals with higher career self-efficacy tend to exhibit greater proactivity and resilience in career exploration, job searching, career transitions, and career growth (Lent & Brown, 2019).

In a dynamic and evolving job market, individuals with higher employability can more effectively adapt to workplace environments, clarify career goals, enhance professional competitiveness, and accumulate career resources through social networks, thereby strengthening their confidence in their professional abilities and increasing their likelihood of overcoming career setbacks (Fugate et al., 2021). Studies indicate that individuals with higher career self-efficacy are more likely to proactively seek out resources and opportunities to enhance their skills and capabilities, leading to sustained career development advantages and higher rates of career success (Kocak & Ural, 2023). Based on the above discussion, the following hypotheses are proposed:

Hypothesis 2: Employability is positively related to career self-efficacy.

# 2.3 The Relationship Between Career Self-efficacy and Career Success

From multiple perspectives, career self-efficacy not only influences individuals' career beliefs and behavioral patterns but is also directly related to key career success outcomes, such as salary levels, job promotions, and career satisfaction. Spurk et al. (2019) found that individuals with high career self-efficacy can maintain focus when facing complex tasks, improve job performance, and thus obtain better career development opportunities. In addition, the study by Zhou et al. (2019) also indicated that career self-efficacy significantly enhances students' career satisfaction and sense of achievement, further suggesting that high levels of career self-efficacy can strengthen students' competitiveness in the job market, allowing them to gain a competitive edge in career development. Furthermore, the research by Zamroni et al. (2022) found that individuals with high career self-efficacy can more effectively mobilize cognitive, social, intellectual, and emotional resources to achieve their career goals. This capacity to utilize diverse resources enhances resilience in facing career challenges and contributes to long-term career success. Therefore, this study hypothesizes that.

Hypothesis 3: Career Self-efficacy is positively related to career success.

#### 2.4 Mediating relationship

Overall, Hypothesis 2 and Hypothesis 3 suggest that career self-efficacy plays a crucial mediating role in the relationship between employability and career success. To better understand the mediating mechanism within this theoretical framework, this study draws on Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT) to explain this phenomenon and explore its process, antecedents, and influencing conditions.

Social Cognitive Career Theory was first proposed by Bandura, emphasizing the impact of learning experiences on self-efficacy, which in turn shapes career intentions and choices, ultimately influencing career success. Within this framework, employability represents a tangible manifestation of learning experiences, with self-efficacy influencing career intentions and choices, which subsequently shape career behaviors and determine career success. In other words, employability serves as a linking mechanism through cognitive factors such as self-efficacy in shaping behavioral performance and career development (Bandura, 2023), forming a dual-pathway mechanism that includes both direct and indirect effects.

Existing research has shown that self-efficacy plays a significant mediating role between achievement motivation and employability (Li et al., 2024) and influences individuals' career development through a chain mediation mechanism. Thereby enhancing their career achievements. Therefore, this study proposes the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 4: Career self-efficacy partially mediates the relationship between employability and career success.

# 3.0 Methodology

## 3.1 Participants

This study was conducted at a comprehensive university located in Zhangjiakou, Hebei Province, China, which consists of 17 secondary colleges. To ensure the representativeness of the sample, a stratified random sampling method was adopted, dividing the 17 secondary colleges into 17 independent strata. This stratified design helps reduce heterogeneity within each stratum, thereby improving the accuracy of overall parameter estimation. Subsequently, the sample size for each college was determined based on the proportion of its graduates to the total number of graduates, and random sampling was conducted within each college. Data were collected through an online questionnaire.

The participants of this study were 1,000 recent graduates who successfully completed their studies in June 2024. According to the estimation criteria of Partial Least Squares (PLS) proposed by Hair et al. (2022), the sample size should exceed the total number of questionnaire items, and ideally be ten times that number. This study involved the estimation of 60 measurement items, so the ideal sample size was 600. To ensure reliable estimation results even under conditions of non-normal data distribution, the final sample size was set at 1,000. Since January 2024, these graduates had actively started seeking employment. Within just one year, all respondents had obtained at least one job, and some had experienced multiple job changes. This phenomenon reflects the high mobility of the current job market and the uncertainty faced by recent graduates in their career development paths.

#### 3.2 Instruments

The data were collected using four validated questionnaires:

Graduate Employability Measurement Scale (GEMS) (Ding, 2019): This scale assesses graduates' employability, including personal adaptability (PA), career identity (CI), human capital (HC), and social capital (SC), with a total of 39 items.

Graduate Self-Efficacy Scale (GSES) (Zhang and Schwarze, 2015): This scale measures graduates' career self-efficacy, consisting of 10 items.

Graduate Career Success Scale (GCSS) (Wang & Long, 2009): This scale evaluates graduates' career success, covering internal organizational competitiveness (IOC), external organizational competitiveness (EOC), and career satisfaction (CSA), with a total of 11 items.

All scales were measured using a five-point Likert scale as the primary tool for assessing graduates' employability, career success, and career self-efficacy. Table 1 provides evidence of the reliability and validity of each scale.

Table 1. Reliability and Validity

Scales	Alpha Cronbach Value —	Composite Reliability		Average Variance Extracted	
		rho_a	rho_c	— (AVE)	
GEMS	0.847	0.847	0.851	0.533	
GSES	0.843	0.936	0.916	0.732	
GCSS	0.881	0.882	0.903	0.659	

#### 3.3 Data Analysis

This study utilized SPSS 27.0 and Smart PLS 4.0 for statistical analysis. SPSS was primarily used for descriptive analysis, summarizing and presenting the demographic characteristics of the respondents, while Smart PLS was used for inferential analysis, examining the relationships between latent variables within the internal model.

Specifically, the variance inflation factor (VIF) was first employed to conduct collinearity analysis, assessing potential multicollinearity issues among variables. Subsequently, path coefficients ( $\beta$ ) were used to evaluate the relationships between latent variables, while the coefficient of determination ( $R^2$ ), cross-validated redundancy ( $Q^2$ ), and effect size ( $f^2$ ) were applied to assess the predictive accuracy and explanatory power of the model. Furthermore, this study considered career self-efficacy as a mediating variable, utilizing the bootstrapping method to compute the standard error and confidence intervals of path coefficients. Additionally, variance accounted for (VAF) was used to assess the relative strength of the mediation effect.

In terms of model evaluation indicators, the R² value ranges from 0 to 1, with higher values indicating greater predictive accuracy of the model (Hair et al., 2010). The Q² value is used to assess the predictive relevance of the model, where values greater than 0 are generally considered acceptable (Henseler et al., 2009). The f² value evaluates the relative contribution of predictor variables to the variance of the dependent variable, with standard values of 0.02, 0.15, and 0.35 representing small, medium, and large effects, respectively. Additionally, the VAF value is used to determine the strength of the mediation effect, where a VAF greater than 0.8 indicates full mediation, while a VAF between 0.2 and 0.8 suggests partial mediation (Hair Jr et al., 2014).

#### 4.0 Findings

Results are shown in Table 2 and Table 3.

# 4.1 The Relationship Between Employability and Career Success

The results of this study indicate a significant positive correlation between the four dimensions of employability (PA, CI, HC, and SC) and career success (CS). Among them, SC ( $\beta$  = 0.213, CS 95% [.150, .276]) and PA ( $\beta$  = 0.209, CS 95% [.145, .275]) have the strongest impact on CS, while CI ( $\beta$  = 0.161, CS 95% [0.097, 0.226]) and HC ( $\beta$  = 0.133, CS 95% [0.073, 0.195]) have relatively weaker effects but remain statistically significant. Additionally, the explanatory variance of CS is R² = 0.317, indicating that the four dimensions of employability account for 31.7% of the variance in career success. The effect size f² for the four dimensions (PA, CI, SC, HC) falls within the "small" range (0.040, 0.025, 0.043, and 0.027, respectively), suggesting a relatively small contribution of each variable to CS. Meanwhile, the predictive relevance of the model is Q² = 0.146, further supporting its predictive ability. In conclusion, these results provide empirical support for Hypothesis 1.

# 4.2 The Relationship Between Employability and Career Self-efficacy

The results of this study indicate a significant positive correlation between employability (EM) and career self-efficacy (SE), with EM ( $\beta$  = 0.550, SE 95% [.506, .596]) having a strong impact on SE. Additionally, the explanatory variance of the model is R<sup>2</sup> = 0.303, meaning that employability accounts for 30.3% of the variance in career self-efficacy, demonstrating that employability is an important factor influencing career self-efficacy. Meanwhile, the predictive relevance of the model is Q<sup>2</sup> = 0.300, indicating that the model has good predictive capability. These results provide empirical support for Hypothesis 2.

# 4.3 The Relationship Between Career Self-efficacy and Career Success

The results of this study indicate a significant positive correlation between career self-efficacy (SE) and career success (CS), with SE ( $\beta$  = 0.230, CS 95% [.165, .291]). Additionally, the explanatory variance of the model is R<sup>2</sup> = 0.221, indicating that while career self-efficacy plays an important role in career success, other factors (such as employability) may also influence career success. Meanwhile, the predictive relevance of the model is Q<sup>2</sup> = 0.218, demonstrating that the model has strong predictive capability. These results provide empirical support for Hypothesis 3.

4.4 Career self-efficacy mediates the relationship between employability and career success

The indirect path coefficient of employability (EM) on career success (CS) is 0.127, with a 95% confidence interval of [0.091, 0.161], indicating that the indirect effect is statistically significant. Meanwhile, the direct path coefficient of EM on CS is 0.435, with a 95% confidence interval of [0.373, 0.496], demonstrating that the direct effect of EM on CS is also significantly positive. Additionally, the total VAF value is 22.6% (total effect = 0.562, indirect effect = 0.127), indicating that career self-efficacy (SE) plays a partial mediating role in the relationship between EM and CS. These results support Hypothesis 4.

Table 2. Path Coefficients and Predictive Relevance

Relationship	Path Coefficient (β)	R²	Q²	f²
$PA \rightarrow CS$	0.209	0.317	0.146	0.040
$CI \rightarrow CS$	0.161	0.317	0.146	0.025
$SC \rightarrow CS$	0.213	0.317	0.146	0.043
$HC \rightarrow CS$	0.133	0.317	0.146	0.027
$EM \to SE$	0.550	0.303	0.300	-
$SE \rightarrow CS$	0.230	0.221	0.218	-

Table 3. Size and Significance of the Mediation Effect

Relationship	Path Coefficient (β)	T-Statistics	P-Values	Bias corrected 95% confidence interval	VAF
$EM \rightarrow CS$	0.435	14.063	0.000	[ 0.373; 0.496 ]	-
$EM \rightarrow SE \rightarrow CS$	0.127	6.955	0.000	[ 0.091; 0.161 ]	-
$EM \rightarrow SE \rightarrow CS$	-	-	-	[ 0.091; 0.161 ]	22.6%

#### 5.0 Discussion

The results of this study are consistent with existing research, confirming the importance of employability as a core concept of "career potential" and providing strong support for human capital theory, which posits that individual capabilities are key predictors of career success (Spurk et al., 2019). Furthermore, this study further validates Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT; Bandura, 2023), revealing a "dual-path mechanism" through which employability not only directly influences career success but also exerts an indirect effect by enhancing self-efficacy. This mediating pathway is also supported by existing literature. For example, De Vos et al. (2020) pointed out that employability involves not only the accumulation of skills but also psychological capital such as self-efficacy; Kocak and Ural (2023) further emphasized that employability significantly enhances individuals' confidence and proactivity; Chughtai (2018) found that self-efficacy plays a key role in driving career success; and Zamroni et al. (2022) noted that individuals with high self-efficacy are better at integrating and utilizing resources, thereby achieving more sustainable and satisfying career development trajectories. These findings not only enrich the theoretical foundation of the relationship between employability and career success but also provide a novel perspective for understanding its underlying mechanisms.

However, there are also differing perspectives in existing research, suggesting that high employability does not necessarily guarantee career success. External environmental factors such as economic conditions, cultural attitudes, and social bias may constrain the positive effects of employability (Suleman, 2021). Therefore, exploring the impact of employability dimensions on career success is of great significance.

# 6.0 Conclusion& Recommendations

This study, using the dual-path model of employability. The research confirms that employability not only directly drives career success but also indirectly facilitates career development through career self-efficacy. At the same time, the study analyzes the different impacts of the four dimensions of employability on career success, highlighting the crucial role of social capital in the early stages of a career. It challenges the traditional "hard skills matching" model, demonstrating the strategic value of social capital as a soft matching resource.

Based on this, it is recommended that universities systematically strengthen students' adaptability, career identity, and social capital development in their curriculum design and career guidance to enhance their overall employability. At the same time, universities should be encouraged to collaborate deeply with employers to achieve an efficient connection between employability and career success. Despite its theoretical and practical contributions, this study has limitations. Data were collected through self-report, raising the risk of common method bias. Additionally, the cross-sectional design limits causal inferences. Future research should consider multi-source and longitudinal designs to strengthen the robustness and generalizability of the findings.

### Paper Contribution to Related Field of Study

This study not only reveals the direct and indirect effects of employability on career success, but also analyzes the differentiated roles of its various dimensions, highlighting the critical value of social capital in the early stages of a career. It reshapes academic understanding of newcomers to the workforce and offers highly valuable practical insights for higher education and corporate management, emphasizing the importance of cultivating social capital and psychological capital to enhance individual employability. Future research can be extended to the entire career lifecycle, exploring the dynamic evolution and role differences of relevant factors

at different stages. By integrating career construction theory, it can systematically analyze the interaction mechanisms between employability and individual career development, promoting innovation in employability theory and its practical application.

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