New ways of fostering sustainable employability in inter-organizational networks:
an explorative study to understand the factors and mechanisms for their success

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Abstract

Purpose – Organizations are increasingly joining inter-organizational networks to foster sustainable employability for their employees. The purpose of this study is to identify the factors and mechanisms central to their success as experienced by key stakeholders.

Design/methodology/approach – An explorative, qualitative approach was adopted, using four focus groups with network coordinators ($N = 18$) and HR professionals ($N = 14$). Fourteen Dutch inter-organizational networks were represented. Respondents were recruited through purposive and snowballing sampling techniques. Thematic analysis was applied using open coding to generate themes.

Findings – The results of this study outline environmental, structural, and inter-personal factors and mechanisms that contribute to the success of inter-organizational networks that aim to foster sustainable employability for their employees. The environmental factors and mechanisms consist of challenges stemming from the labor market. The structural factors and mechanisms include: a network's flat structure, flat fee, lack of informal rules, the allocation of roles and expectations for stakeholders and shared network activities. Lastly, the inter-personal factors and mechanisms are: communication among stakeholders, establishing reciprocity, interaction and collaboration between stakeholders, the valuation of trust, a convivial culture and shared vision among stakeholders. The dynamics between these factors and mechanisms are compared to other forms of inter-organizational networks. Furthermore, several recommendations for network coordinators and practitioners regarding the development of networks are presented.

Originality/value – This study provides insights into the factors and mechanisms that are regarded by stakeholders as influencing the success of inter-organizational networks in their ability to foster sustainable employability for workers. We have identified a unique model that captures this new way of inter-organizational collaboration and builds on insights from literature on collaborative governance regimes, institutional fields and entrepreneurial ecosystems. Specifically, the model provides a framework that consists of environmental, structural and interpersonal factors and mechanisms for network success. This study

increases our understanding of how collaborative efforts can be fostered beyond organizational boundaries and existing Human Resource Management practices.

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Introduction

Within Europe, the workforce is aging (van Dam *et al.*, 2017) and the availability of skilled employees is lower than pre-COVID-19 levels (Eurostat, 2022). These trends create difficulties for organizations to attract and retain human capital in a sustainable way. Additionally, technological developments make various jobs and skills obsolete, thereby creating a skill mismatch between employees and their job requirements (Brunello and Wruuck, 2021). A lack of skilled employees implies difficulties for organizations to simply replace under-skilled employees and may, if insufficiently addressed, result in reduced organizational performance (Brunello and Wruuck, 2021; Molloy and Barney, 2015; Martini *et al.*, 2023). Also, public policymakers regard these developments as threats to increased labor participation throughout the European Union (Eurofond, 2022).

In response to these challenges, initiatives to foster sustainable employability are high on governmental and corporate agendas (Semeijn *et al.*, 2015; Ybema *et al.*, 2017; Podgorodnichenko *et al.*, 2022). Within the literature, sustainable employability is defined as "the extent to which workers are able and willing to remain working, now and in the future" (Ybema *et al.*, 2017, p. 888). Furthermore, sustainable employability is shaped by the interaction between workers (e.g. their characteristics) and their environment (e.g. work context and labor market) (Gazier, 1998). Organizations can shape the work context by implementing (sustainable) HRM (Human Resource Management) practices (Semeijn *et al.*, 2015; Ybema *et al.*, 2017; Martini *et al.*, 2023). Organizations that support their employees by offering (sustainable) HRM practices increase their employees' human capital and subsequently their organizational performance (Utrilla *et al.*, 2022). Yet, from a single organizational perspective the implementation of such practices may be financially expensive, difficult to align with employee and organizational interests, and incur unintended consequences (van Holland *et al.*, 2017; Stynen *et al.*, 2019; Podgorodnichenko *et al.*, 2022).

Due to these difficulties and organizations' tendency to focus more on their core activities, organizations in Western countries are increasingly recognizing the need to form partnerships with other companies, and may join collaborative inter-organizational networks to tackle common human capital issues and challenges in the labor market (Bakker *et al.*, 2018; Ingold and Valizade, 2017). When stakeholders, like employers who are interconnected or dependent on one another to address a common grand challenge, the formation of inter-organizational networks becomes more likely (Ferraro *et al.*, 2015; Gray *et al.*, 2022). These inter-organizational networks can then create an environment that extends beyond its own boundaries and positively affects employees' sustainable employability (de Vos *et al.*, 2020; Donald *et al.*, 2020; Curşeu *et al.*, 2021). This fits with the enhanced attention in the career literature on environments that consist of multiple actors and institutions (e.g. employees, organizations, governments, etc.) shaping workers' careers (Donald *et al.*, 2020). Inter-organizational networks often operate in a regional context whereby organizations, either public or private, collaborate to co-create practices that go beyond organizational boundaries to increase job mobility and foster employees' personal and career development (Curşeu *et al.*, 2021; van Gestel *et al.*, 2018). This innovative approach creates pathways to help organizations attract, maintain and retain skilled workers by optimizing labor mobility in regions (Ingold and Valizade, 2017). Furthermore, inter-organizational networks can help

develop employees' skills, abilities and knowledge to remain employable, both within their current organization and within the labor market (Swart and Kinnie, 2014). In this way, they promote sustainable employability for employees.

Within the network literature, several forms of inter-organizational networks have been identified such as strategic alliances, joint ventures, partnerships and subcontracting (Barringer and Harrison, 2000; Provan *et al.*, 2007). However, the type of network central to this paper is novel. The main goal of these inter-organizational networks is to address shared human capital issues across employers, in a regional setting, by co-creating activities that foster sustainable employability for employees. The networks can be sectoral or inter-sectoral, and may contain both public and private organizations. They tend to be decentralized with informal ties between member organizations, which is also a characteristic of other forms of inter-organizational networks (Barringer and Harrison, 2000; Provan *et al.*, 2007). To achieve their goal, inter-organizational networks create opportunities for employees within the network to find new employment and to develop employees' skills and abilities by hosting activities. The development of (sustainable) employability in the context of networks fits with the notion of "interactive employability" by Gazier (1998) in which employers and public institutions foster employability through their interactions with employees. Sustainable employability is achieved when involved parties foster employability that is valuable for employees and their work context (Van der Klink *et al.*, 2016).

Inter-organizational networks with this specific purpose, are found in several countries, for example in the UK (Ingold and Valizade, 2017; Lindsay *et al.*, 2008), Denmark (Ingold and Valizade, 2017) and the Netherlands (Bakker *et al.*, 2018). Their emergence is accelerating due to the increased sense of urgency in addressing human capital issues in a sustainable way (van Dam *et al.*, 2017; Ybema *et al.*, 2017). Due to the novelty of inter-organizational networks, empirical research on these new ways of organizing sustainable employability is lacking (Koster, 2021). Abundant literature on other well-established networks, including strategic alliances, joint ventures and subcontracting, has argued that not all inter-organizational collaborations are successful (Barringer and Harrison, 2000; Huxham and Vangen, 2004). However, inter-organizational networks in the context of our study are different from the other types of networks regarding the goals, the number and type of organizations involved, and the type of activities they organize. Therefore, it is possible that the mechanisms and factors that explain successful collaboration are unique. Since the emergence of inter-organizational networks is increasing, it is important to enhance our understanding of these new ways of inter-organizational collaboration and to gain a broader understanding of the factors and mechanisms required for their success. Therefore, this study seeks to identify the factors and mechanisms central to inter-organizational network success or optimal accruement of the potential (sustainable employability) benefits of inter-organizational membership for both organizations and workers. Specifically, this study seeks to answer the following research question:

RQ1. What factors and mechanisms influence inter-organizational networks' success in terms of optimally facilitating sustainable employability for workers from member organizations?

As this type of network is novel, we draw from current insights from the broader inter-organizational network literature to identify possible commonalities and unique aspects of the underlying factors and mechanisms that drive the success of these new networks. Given the exploratory nature of this study, qualitative data collection techniques and analysis were used to gauge these factors and mechanisms as perceived by key stakeholders.

The main contribution of the present study is the creation of a novel conceptual framework, which advances and enriches what is currently known about inter-organizational networks as a whole and this new type of inter-organizational network. Specifically, the proposed framework provides a novel configuration of factors and mechanisms. It also considers the dynamics which

are crucial for understanding the success of this new type of network. Overall, our framework shows how collaborative efforts can be fostered to promote sustainable employability.

Literature Review

Sustainable employability from an interactive perspective

Sustainable employability refers to workers' ability and motivation to work from a long-term perspective (Ybema *et al.*, 2017). From an "interactive" viewpoint, sustainable employability is shaped by the interplay between employees, employers and public institutions (Gazier, 1998). Sustainable employability is hence a product of the interaction between workers' individual capacities to perform meaningful work and the degree to which this is valued in the internal and external labor market. In fact, employment initiatives help combat unemployment and strengthen the labor market, which benefits employees, organizations and society (Martini *et al.*, 2023). Opportunities for developing employees' knowledge, skills and abilities (KSAs) and opportunities for them to apply them in practice are therefore crucial (Van der Klink *et al.*, 2016). Earlier research has shown that workers who have opportunities to develop their skills and abilities can enhance their ability to maintain their current job and their ability to make a job transition (Semeijn *et al.*, 2015; Martini *et al.*, 2023). This helps workers obtain job positions that they value and where they can excel, which increases their motivation to work longer and retire later (van Dam *et al.*, 2017; Ybema *et al.*, 2017). Furthermore, a good match between a worker and their job helps protect their health (e.g. prevent burnout), which is also crucial for work participation in the long term (Semeijn *et al.*, 2015; Fleuren *et al.*, 2020).

Shaping employees' sustainable employability can occur in various settings including, but not limited to, the organizational context. For example, cities have been identified as a context that can shape workers' sustainable employability (Curşeu *et al.*, 2021), and as this study suggests, inter-organizational networks. Opportunities to develop and apply KSAs are in this study, centered on inter-organizational networks. Inter-organizational networks can also provide opportunities for workers by hosting network events and activities such as: workshops, job fairs, matching tables, career days, career counseling and more. For example, IGOM (Inter-Gemeentelijk Overleg Mobiliteit [Inter-Municipal Mobility Consultation]), located in the southern part of the Netherlands, is an inter-organizational network that offers a range of training and development opportunities via their academy to enhance workers' KSAs. In addition, they also promote and share open job vacancies within the network to stimulate job mobility. These events and activities are actualized by the collaborative efforts of member organizations.

Factors and mechanisms for inter-organizational collaboration

Currently, not much is known about inter-organizational networks that strive to foster sustainable employability for employees. Network success is the extent that an inter-organizational network can collaborate in a way that optimizes the attainment of the intended (sustainable employability) benefits for personnel of the member organizations. To identify the factors and mechanisms that drive network success, we resort to literature streams that focus on collaborations between organizations to solve grand challenges. Within the literature, several theoretical angles such as institutional fields, ecosystems and collaborative governance regimes provide unique perspectives on the possible factors and mechanisms that underpin successful inter-organizational collaboration. By reviewing these streams, we provide multiple perspectives on collaboration between organizations.

Entrepreneurial ecosystems. Entrepreneurial ecosystems have received attention in the economics literature. They are socio-economic environments that consist of interdependent actors and factors that are coordinated to promote entrepreneurship within a specific region

(Stam, 2015). The composition of these ecosystems, in terms of individuals, organizations and types of ventures is argued to be heterogeneous (Roundy *et al.*, 2017), which fosters innovation and success (Feld, 2020). Within ecosystems, entrepreneurs are the key actors. They seek out opportunities within their environment and exploit them to maximize value for their organization and ecosystem (Stam *et al.*, 2012). Some entrepreneurial ecosystems offer shared HRM activities to help organizations attract and develop the talent they seek (Roundy and Burke-Smalley, 2022). Their entrepreneurial activities may shape the ecosystem itself, for example, an entrepreneur who facilitates public action to address a particular issue (Stam, 2015). Yet, the ecosystem itself affects the likelihood that entrepreneurship emerges due to cultural norms and governmental regulations or impulses (Feld, 2020). For example, the Dutch government stimulates entrepreneurship by providing tax breaks for start-ups and small organizations (Belastingdienst, n.d.). Moreover, the Netherlands has a history of tackling economic and societal challenges by fostering social dialogue among various stakeholders to make consensus-based decisions (Dekker *et al.*, 2017; Karsten *et al.*, 2008). Consensus-based decisions entail mutual commitment and shared responsibility from stakeholders as well as negotiations aimed at finding mutually acceptable solutions (Karsten *et al.*, 2008). This societal mindset may increase Dutch organizations' willingness to collaborate with external organizations to tackle shared human capital issues because it is perceived as being the norm.

Within an entrepreneurial ecosystem, ten interdependent mechanisms have been identified for value creation and fall into two categories, institutional arrangements and resource endowments (Stam and van de Ven, 2021; Woolley, 2017). Institutional arrangements consist of formal institutions (e.g. societal rules), culture (e.g. the degree society values entrepreneurship) and networks (e.g. entrepreneurs' social connections) (Stam and van de Ven, 2021). Formal institutions have been argued to provide the pre-conditions for entrepreneurial activities (Granovetter, 1992) and shape entrepreneurs' actions regarding goal attainment (Baumol, 1996). Furthermore, networks of entrepreneurs are crucial for knowledge exchange and distributing resources, such as human capital and knowledge (Stam, 2015; Stam and van de Ven, 2021). The second category, resource endowments, consists of physical infrastructure (e.g. transportation networks), market demand for products and services, finance, leadership, intermediaries, talent (e.g. skilled workers) and knowledge creation (Stam and van de Ven, 2021). Intermediaries refer to organizations that offer services that help reduce the barriers to initializing and streamlining projects (Stam and van de Ven, 2021; Stam, 2015). For example, a recruitment organization that offers their services to the network, but is not a member themselves, is an intermediary. Of these mechanisms, leadership is critical for the maintenance and longevity of ecosystems (Feldman, 2014). This role is often fulfilled by committed entrepreneurs who help guide and direct the activities as well as help stimulate public interest (Feldman, 2014; Stam *et al.*, 2012; Stam and van de Ven, 2021). Finally, knowledge is a key factor for identifying and evaluating potential opportunities and finding solutions (Audretsch and Lehmann, 2005). Since knowledge resides in workers, a diverse and highly skilled talent is indicative of the knowledge available within an ecosystem. Yet, organizations can create new knowledge by investing in scientific and technological endeavors, thereby fostering innovation (Stam and van de Ven, 2021).

Institutional fields. Institutional fields have received attention in the management and sociology literature. They are socially constructed spaces created by common meaning and understanding between organizations that share rules and resources (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983; Scott, 1994). They consist of cultural-cognitive, normative and regulative mechanisms that shape the behavior of organizations in the same field (Scott, 2008). Cultural-cognitive mechanisms stem from a shared understanding between organizations and provide a common lens for organizations to make sense of their environment (Hardy *et al.*, 2005; Hibbert

et al., 2008; Scott, 2008; Vangen and Huxham, 2011; Zhang, 2023). Regulative mechanisms consist of rules, laws and sanctions and are coercive in nature (Scott, 2008). Normative mechanisms pertain to the beliefs, values and norms that create expectations, rather than rules, between organizations (Hardy *et al.*, 2005; Hibbert *et al.*, 2008; Scott, 2008). These three categories of mechanisms do not operate in isolation, rather they interact and reinforce one another (Scott, 2008). When these mechanisms lack alignment, individual stakeholders may leverage network resources for their own goals, rather than for collective goals (Strang and Sine, 2002). However, when the mechanisms are aligned, they foster a collaborative dynamic that fosters network success (Scott, 2008). Such a dynamic can lead to the creation and adaptation of the rules and procedures within the field (Lawrence *et al.*, 2002). For example, repeated interactions between organizations foster and influence common meaning and shared understanding between organizations (Hardy *et al.*, 2005; Phillips *et al.*, 2000; Zhang, 2023). Furthermore, shared understandings (cultural-cognitive mechanisms) impact the structure, which in turn impacts the relations between organizations (Phillips *et al.*, 2000). Moreover, power imbalances between organizations may occur. Organizations with a high degree of power and control are better able to shape the norms and regulations that constitute their field (Furnari *et al.*, 2016; Gray *et al.*, 2022). This may lead to disparity between organizations, some organizations may benefit while others are disadvantaged.

Collaborative governance regimes. Collaborative governance regimes are prominent in the public administration literature. They consist of public or public and private organizations that strive to stimulate public involvement and civic participation (Ansell and Gash, 2008; Emerson *et al.*, 2011). They tend to have a flat structure and decision-making is shared among the member organizations. Typically, collaborative governance networks are initiated by public organizations to co-create public policies and jointly make decisions to address political issues (Ansell and Gash, 2008; Emerson *et al.*, 2011). Moreover, collaborative governance regimes are most successful when organizations seek to tackle grand challenges that transcend the boundaries of single organizations. Organizations cannot tackle these issues on their own and grand challenges create common goals that foster collaboration (Ferraro *et al.*, 2015; Gray *et al.*, 2022). Additionally, the success of collaborative governance regimes is contingent on the strength of the collaborative dynamic between member organizations (Emerson *et al.*, 2011).

Mechanisms that influence the strength of the collaborative dynamic fall into three categories: principled engagement, shared motivation and capacity for joint action. (Emerson *et al.*, 2011). First, principled engagement refers to the process where stakeholders discover their shared interests and concerns (discovery), create shared meaning or purpose (definition), open communication between stakeholders (deliberation) and make procedural decisions (determinations). However, individual organizations may have different needs and expectations, and the extent of agreement between the network interests and organizational interests may differ (van Gestel *et al.*, 2018; Lemaire, 2020). In particular, prolonged engagement is seen as difficult to establish, and to foster this ongoing process it is suggested to create temporally and spatially interconnected events (Ferraro *et al.*, 2015). Second, capacity for joint action refers to the structural aspects of a network and consists of procedural arrangements, leadership, knowledge and resources (Emerson *et al.*, 2011). These structural factors enable engagement between stakeholders for constructive interaction (Ferraro *et al.*, 2015). Third, shared motivation, refers to the relational aspects between stakeholders and consists of trust, understanding, legitimacy and commitment (Emerson *et al.*, 2011). For collaborative governance regimes to be successful, the literature stresses the importance of key stakeholders' commitment and willingness to cooperate with each other (Emerson *et al.*, 2011; Lindsay *et al.*, 2008). Furthermore, it is essential that they and their organization are convinced that the network goals are aligned with their own in order to reap the benefits of network membership (Lindsay *et al.*, 2008; Provan and Kenis, 2008).

The resulting collaborative dynamic is expected to result in shared activities and practices at the network level, which benefit both organizations and their employees.

These complementary and unique perspectives provide a deeper understanding of how inter-organizational networks function.

Methods

Study design

This study has a qualitative, explorative design. This design is suitable for investigating topics, such as inter-organizational networks, that are not well studied (Verleye, 2019). Specifically, focus groups with network coordinators and HR professionals were conducted as they have first-hand experience with the collaborative efforts in inter-organizational networks at the level of the network itself. Other stakeholders, such as top management (e.g. CEO) are not included because they are less involved in networks. The context of this study took place in the Netherlands, which is currently experiencing an aging workforce, labor market shortages and skill mismatches (de Ree, 2023; van Gurp, 2023). These societal challenges are highly relevant for the emergence and potential usefulness of inter-organizational networks. Moreover, engaging in social dialogue to generate solutions for societal challenges is prominent in Dutch society.

Sample and procedure

This study involves 14 inter-organizational networks that are active in the Netherlands that offer events and activities to promote employees' personal and/or career development, with the ultimate goal of fostering sustainable employability and a circular labor market. Eleven inter-organizational networks are inter-sectoral, and five focus on strengthening a specific sector, such as healthcare. The size of the inter-organizational networks varied from 11 to over 100 member organizations. Both organizations and employees are expected to reap benefits from inter-organizational networks. Organizations have access to job candidates, best practices, knowledge, solutions and they reap cost benefits from sharing HR activities. Employees benefit from having access to jobs, career advice and personal development opportunities.

To sample respondents, a mixed approach comprising of purposive and snowballing sampling techniques was followed. To be eligible for the study, the network's main goals must be centered on fostering sustainable employability and job mobility for workers. Bakker *et al.* (2018) identified 22 inter-organizational networks, in the Netherlands, that fit these criteria. In their report, they included the network coordinators' contact information, which the researchers used to establish initial contact. In addition, a few network coordinators also introduced the researchers to additional network coordinators. Furthermore, the researchers contacted network coordinators in their personal networks. The researchers sent an e-mail outlining the study and requested a short meeting to explain the research project in detail. The network coordinators were encouraged to invite eligible HR professionals using an invitation letter provided by the authors. Asking participants to recommend others within their personal network who could be eligible for participation is called snowball sampling (Robinson, 2014). Snowball sampling was used for recruiting network coordinators and HR professionals because they are difficult to target. The authors also identified member organizations via the network's websites and invited HR professionals directly using the invitation letter. Before each focus group, participants were e-mailed an informed consent form, which outlined the study's purpose, potential risks, data collection and storage procedures. To participate, participants were required to sign and return the form via e-mail to the researchers. This study received ethical approval from the authors' institutional ethical committee.

Two stakeholder groups were included in this study, namely, network coordinators ($N = 16$) and HR professionals ($N = 14$). Network coordinators were identified as the person(s) who is/are responsible for managing and directing an inter-organizational network. HR professionals serve as a gatekeeper between their workers and the opportunities within their network. The role of HR professionals as 'gatekeepers' for employment and developmental opportunities for workers is well-established in the literature (Holmes, 2013). These stakeholder groups have first-hand experience with inter-organizational networks at the level of the network itself, which transcends individual experiences on a particular case (line-manager) or event organized in the network (employees). Their insights are crucial for generating insights at the network level.

Regarding the focus groups for network coordinators, only one to two network coordinators per inter-organizational network participated. The ages of the network coordinators ranged from 43 to 60 ($M = 50.20$; SD $= 5.65$) and the years that they were active in their inter-organizational network ranged from 3 to 17 years ($M = 8.18$; SD $= 4.42$). Eleven network coordinators were female. HR professionals were invited to participate if they (1) were employed by a member organization (2) were active within the network and (3) served as a gatekeeper between their organization and network. They were from different organizations and were representative of the participating inter-organizational networks. Their ages ranged from 34 to 60 ($M = 51.91$; SD $= 8.72$). The number of years they have been active in an inter-organizational network ranged from 1 to 17 ($M = 6.5$; SD $= 4.01$). Ten participants were female. The HR professionals worked in the following sectors: culture, sport and recreation ($N = 2$), public safety ($N = 2$), health and well-being ($N = 2$), finance ($N = 2$), transportation ($N = 1$), criminal justice ($N = 1$), food and beverage ($N = 1$), public administration and governmental services ($N = 1$), energy ($N = 1$), and education ($N = 1$).

Data collection
The primary data collection method used in this study is focus groups. Focus groups refer to small groups of participants who informally discuss (a) predetermined topic(s) in the presence of a moderator (Wilkinson, 2004). For each stakeholder group, two focus groups were hosted online aimed at gathering 6–10 respondents each, which is in line with Guest et al.'s (2017) guidelines. This arrangement helped foster group interaction, which helped the commonalities and differences between inter-organizational networks to emerge (Ivanoff and Hultberg, 2006). Stakeholder groups were separated to ensure that status differences between participants did not influence responses or prevent participants from contributing to the discussion. Each focus group was hosted online in Dutch, audio recorded, and lasted approximately 1.5 h. The second author moderated the sessions using a topic guide based on the study aims, and the first author made field notes. The topic guide covered the following themes: the purpose and goals, the organization/structure, the benefits of network membership for organizations and employees, factors that promote the realization of the goals, factors that hinder the realization of the goals, and the impact of Covid-19. See Appendix for the focus group topic guide. An extensive part of the focus group was devoted to identifying factors and mechanisms that may foster or hinder the attainment of the potential benefits. Before commencing the focus groups, both moderators introduced themselves and reminded participants of the study's purpose and aim. After each topic was introduced by the 1st moderator, participants were encouraged to explain their perspectives. The moderator ascertained that all respondents were involved and encouraged respondents to interact and respond to other participants, which is the aim of focus groups. By interacting with one another, participants were encouraged to explore shared and individual views (Tong et al., 2007). After the focus group, participants were asked to fill in a short online questionnaire hosted on Limesurvey to record their age, gender and how many years they

have been active in the inter-organizational network. The purpose of the questionnaire was to record participants' demographic data. There were seven network coordinators in the first group and nine in the second. There were six HR professionals in the first group and five in the second. One HR professional who was not able to attend provided written answers to the questions covered in the topic guide. Furthermore, two HR professionals who were not able to attend were interviewed by the first author using the same topic guide.

Data analysis
The focus group and interview recordings were transcribed verbatim. Thematic analysis was applied using open coding to generate themes (Xu and Zammit, 2020). Atlas.ti was used to facilitate this process. In the first phase, the first author created 86 codes that were descriptive (in vivo) and generated inductively. In the second phase, the first and second author discussed the content of each code. Specifically, they identified overlapping codes and re-categorized codes as the codes were combined or split. This led to 48 codes. Next, the resulting codes were merged into the following major themes: labor market challenges, network structure, roles expectations and characteristics for key stakeholders, shared obstacles and vision, culture (network), trust, interaction and collaboration, communication, and reciprocity. In the last phase, patterns and connections between the major themes and their subcategories were identified and all authors were involved. Three overarching categories were identified, namely: environmental factors and mechanisms, structural factors and mechanisms (network), and inter-personal factors and mechanisms. Additionally, the identified patterns and connections were used to create a narrative story, which was used to structure the results section.

To check the inter-rater reliability, each quote was assigned a number immediately after the second phase. A random number generator was used to select 10% of the quotes from each of the four transcripts. The selected quotes were re-coded again by the fourth author, who was not involved in the aforementioned coding during the first or second phase. To calculate the inter-rater reliability, the number of quotes that were given the same code by both researchers was divided by the total number of quotes. This resulted in an inter-rater reliability score of 88%. Since the focus groups were hosted in Dutch, the quotes extracted were translated into English and discussed by the research team. The first and second authors also discussed data saturation and determined sufficient saturation was achieved because codes from all major themes were found in all focus groups and there were no indications that other key themes were missing, which is in line with Guest *et al.* (2017).

Results
The study identified the factors and mechanisms at the network level that, according to respondents, influence a network's success regarding reaping the benefits for both organizations and employees. The factors and mechanisms fall into three categories: environmental, structural and inter-personal. See Table 1 for an overview of the categories, themes and codes.

Environmental factors and mechanisms
This category captures the external influences external to the network and prompts them to act.

Impetus by labor market challenges. Trends in the labor market pose challenges for organizations. An HR professional noted that recruiting job candidates can be challenging due to a tight labor market *("we had a tight labor market and you had to try very hard to find people to fill vacancies" (interview, HR professional 7))*. Yet, due to Covid-19, there was a

Environmental factors and mechanisms
Labor market challenges
  Challenges
    • adapting to/influence of Covid-19 ($N = 30$)
    • human capital trends ($N = 10$)
  Decisiveness
    • decisions are made quickly and action is taken within the network ($N = 7$)

Structural factors and mechanisms (network)
Network structure
    • finance ($N = 75$)
    • issues stemming from increasing the size of a network ($N = 5$)
    • legal status of network ($N = 28$)
    • low threshold/little hierarchy ($N = 4$)
    • physical infrastructure ($N = 26$)
    • technological infrastructure ($N = 77$)
    • types of shared network activities ($N = 68$)
    • projects and initiatives ($N = 6$)
Roles, expectations and characteristics for key stakeholders
  Characteristics
    • network coordinator's employment status ($N = 5$)
    • 3rd party organizations (intermediaries) ($N = 14$)
    • steering committee ($N = 20$)
    • working groups ($N = 7$)
    • enthusiastic network coordinators ($N = 3$)
  Roles
    • network coordinators' roles ($N = 18$)
    • HR professionals' roles ($N = 19$)
    • network's role is to support organizations ($N = 23$)
  Expectations
    • accountability regarding producing benefits and meeting organizations' expectations ($N = 12$)
    • HR professionals are expected to be committed and actively participate in the network ($N = 78$)
    • expectations for HR professionals (other than commitment) ($N = 6$)
  Rules
    • rules and regulations external to the network (societal rules) ($N = 8$)
    • rules within the network ($N = 8$)
    • informal rules about career transitions within member organizations ($N = 16$)

Inter-personal factors and mechanisms
Shared obstacles and vision
  Shared obstacles
    • obstacles and external conditions ($N = 13$)
    • sense of urgency ($N = 4$)
  Shared vision
    • shared interests/goals among organizations ($N = 25$)
    • foster organization's CSR/image ($N = 10$)
Culture (network)
    • culture within network ($N = 6$)
    • creating a safe environment for employees ($N = 9$)
Trust
    • trust as a network value ($N = 2$)
    • trust between network members ($N = 9$)
    • trust between HR professionals/member organizations and employees ($N = 4$)

Table 1.
An overview of the categories, themes and codes regarding the factors and mechanisms that influence inter-organizational success

Interaction and collaboration
    Interaction
        ● employee networking among peers ($N = 4$)
        ● employee networking with HR professionals/organization representatives ($N = 12$)
        ● interactions between network stakeholders ($N = 33$)
        ● short and direct contact lines ($N = 16$)
        ● frequency of contact and interaction ($N = 3$)
        ● small groups of people ($N = 5$)
    Collaboration
        ● collaboration within the network ($N = 24$)
Communication
    Communication
        ● clear communication ($N = 27$)
        ● sharing success stories ($N = 6$)
    Measuring outcomes
        ● difficult to define outcomes ($N = 13$)
        ● lack of data regarding outcomes ($N = 4$)
        ● strategies for measuring outcomes ($N = 14$)
Reciprocity
        ● reciprocity between member organizations/HR professionals ($N = 13$)
        ● sharing resources and knowledge ($N = 46$)

Source(s): Authors own creation

sudden influx of job candidates in the labor market thereby creating new challenges (*"with us they [job vacancies] are closed. . . not because we are no longer recruiting, we are recruiting at maximum capacity because we had so much recruitment all of a sudden" (focus group, network coordinator 1)).* Due to these trends, job mobility is now a prominent topic in society *("mobility is hot and hip and happening again, because everyone has to move from work to work" (focus group, network coordinators 1)).* To overcome these challenges, it is important to make decisions quickly and efficiently, which is a strength of networks *("the power of an employer's network. . . is that we work with their demand and immediately do something (focus group, network coordinator 2)).*

Structural factors and mechanisms
The second category of factors pertains to the structural 'enablers' of the interactions that take place between the stakeholders in the inter-organizational networks, or the interactions that networks have with their external environment.

Flat structure and flat fee. In terms of overall structure, both network coordinators and HR professionals noted that their network has a flat, horizontal structure *("from my perspective, there is little hierarchy" (focus group, HR professionals 2)).* This structure seems compatible with easing the challenges organizations face. Several network coordinators noted that their network is an association, while others indicated that their network is a foundation [1] *("we deliberately chose for a foundation, not an association" (focus group, network coordinators 1)) ("we have been an association since 2016" (focus group, network coordinators 1)).* Additionally, many networks have a steering committee. Network coordinators are often on the steering committee and in some networks HR professionals from member organizations are also included. Some networks have working groups that focus on specific themes relevant to the network.

Networks that are a foundation or association require financing to host shared network activities. To fund themselves many, but not all networks, require their members to pay an

annual fee for participating in the network. The fee may be a flat rate for each organization, *("€ 3,000,- per year per organization" (chat from focus group, network coordinators 1))* or a flat rate that takes into account the number of employees a member organization has *("small organizations under 50 employees pay 2000 euros excluding tax and over 1,000 employees 8,500 excluding tax. And then there are some tiers in-between" (focus group, network coordinators 2)).* A few networks receive subsidies from governmental agencies *(" we have subsidy money from municipality Leeuwarden and the province of Fryslân (focus group, network coordinators 2)).*

Monetary resources are required to fund shared network activities *("...participating organizations create a budget to do things and organize activities (focus groups, HR professionals 1)).* Shared network activities are the means for actualizing a network's goals and creating benefits. During the focus groups, several shared network activities were identified namely: allocation of a mentor, (online) workshops/training, internships and secondments, receiving job orientation guidance, access to experts (e.g. career counselors), job vacancy and active CV exchanges, open house days in partner organizations, career days, matching tables and personal pitches to interested employers. Some activities take place online *("looking at activities I myself had organized with work week, vitality week, also with webinars and apps" (focus group, HR professionals 2)),* whereas other activities take place at a physical location *("we now have our meetings, which are normally physical meetings" (focus group, network coordinators 1)).* Additionally, some networks supplement their activities with projects and initiatives targeted to specific topics *("projects is a really hot item for us as well. Now we are also working on a youth project to recruit more young people in this region" (focus group, network coordinators 2)).*

Lack of formal rules within the network. In line with the flat hierarchical structure, there are few formal rules regarding how member organizations should act and contribute to the network. In fact, an HR professional suggested that formalizing a network could result in organizations terminating their membership *(" are you going to formalize it completely? That doesn't seem right either. You will have drop-outs" (interview, HR14)).* However, networks are still required to follow governmental regulations and laws, such as data privacy laws (GDPR) *("do you have Pete's phone number? I say I cannot give you that" (focus group, network coordinators 1).* Also, existing labor regulations regarding negotiating employment conditions and internal hiring procedures, can make it difficult to foster job mobility *("we work with secondments and the police also takes [employees] from our network, yes, then you get a whole different set of ground rules" (focus group, HR professionals 1)).* Furthermore, the informal rules organizations have regarding external career transitions can impede actual worker mobility *(" a manager can say you can do a temporary assignment* [in another company]*, but then your FTE is gone, and then we say goodbye. And that is an extra barrier for the employee not to do it (focus group, HR professionals 1)).*

The allocation of roles and expectations for stakeholders. The main role of networks is to help member organizations support their workers regarding job mobility *("[the network] helps employers to support employees towards new opportunities in the external labor market" (Written response, HR professional 8)).* Networks are held accountable for producing benefits for member organizations *("we feel as a network that we do have to show something towards our members" (focus group, network coordinators1)).* Within networks, network coordinators are key stakeholders since they are responsible for managing and maintaining their network *("two employees from [name of organization] are ultimately responsible for the overall organization [of the network]" (Written response, HR professional 8)).* Some network coordinators mentioned that being a network coordinator is their full-time job, while others noted that it was a part-time job that they did next to their main job. Due to their position, they may adopt a leadership role, which has been identified by an HR professional as key for sustaining a network *("I also find that maintaining a network often depends on the effort of*

well, 1, 2, well maybe 3 people who pull the cart. And also put a lot of effort into that" (focus group, HR professionals 1)). Additionally, leadership roles may also assigned to the steering committee and project leaders. Enthusiastic network coordinators are seen as important for fostering network success ("what is also promoting factor is that the people who set up or run the networks that they are enthusiastic" (focus group, HR professionals 2)).

The steering committee is responsible for guiding and directing the network to ensure that the goals are achieved. They may also be responsible for the logistics within their network. For example, creating the yearly agenda. The working groups are responsible for addressing a specific theme or project ("under the board we now have 5 working groups running, each working on one of the themes from the network" (focus group, network coordinator 2)). Additionally, some networks work with other parties, such as a works council, in which representatives of organizations participate to ensure quality ("we always invite the works council too" (focus group, network coordinator 1)). Other networks have a tender for the services of external organizations or intermediaries that member organizations may use ("we have a tender running [...] we hire for several million on an annual basis" (focus group, network coordinator 2)). The membership fee also prompts network coordinators and other key stakeholders within the network to contribute to the network ("the amount is quite steep for one small company, but on the other hand, it also obliges you, as a network, to ultimately deliver what the company is looking for" (focus group, network coordinator 2)).

HR professionals also play an important role within networks as a representative and gatekeeper between their network and their organization. Additionally, they are responsible for allowing others to learn about their organization and for sharing job vacancies and talent within the network. In some networks, HR professionals are responsible for hosting activities ("the matching tables are also always organized by one of our members" (focus group, network coordinators 1)). Within all networks, HR professionals are expected to show commitment and participate in network activities ("with us participation is expected, active participation is expected" (focus group, network coordinators 1)). The membership fee that an organization pays helps solidify commitment ("the contribution is at the same time a kind of confirmation of commitment" (focus group, HR professionals 1)).

Inter-personal factors and mechanisms
This category of factors lies at the core of the collaborative interactions that take place within networks and tie in with relational activities that keep inter-organizational networks engaged towards achieving their goals.

Creating a shared vision among member organizations. Several network coordinators and HR professionals noted that member organizations should have similar interests or experience similar obstacles as other organizations in the network. A shared vision helps create solidarity within the network ("this is about connection from interests and self-interests and not from structure" (focus group, HR professionals 2)). It also helps foster new connections within the network. An HR professional explained that:"... there are differences, but also that there are a lot of similarities. Maybe even more than you initially think. And that is where you look for each other" (focus group, HR professionals 1)). Some organizations join a network as a means to give back to society ("a bank also, of course, wants to make money, but we also want to give something back to society" (focus group, HR professionals 1)). Other organizations seek support to overcome obstacles that they encounter. A sense of urgency in overcoming challenges can promote collaboration ("if I look at the directors of such organizations [who have hard times] they are much more willing to cooperate" (focus group, HR professionals 2)). Yet, HR professionals noted that line managers from their organizations create a barrier when they are focused on their specific area ("ultimately you also look at the

interests of the organization, but that manager is only at the table for his own organizational part" (focus group, HR professionals 1)).

Nurturing a convivial culture. The culture within networks is convivial *("we have, for example, an agreement among ourselves, you do not throw dirt over the fence" (focus group, network coordinator 1)).* A network coordinator noted that a conviviality culture fosters commitment *("[the] benefits and advantages for me or namely our participants, employers, is a lot of conviviality. That is very basic, but that is what people come back for" (focus group, network coordinator 1)).* Additionally, several network coordinators and HR professionals stressed that their networks strive to create a safe environment where employees and job candidates are valued and have access to development opportunities (" *it's also important to have a culture where it [job mobility and personal development] is appreciated and encouraged. That you gain experience" (focus group, HR professionals 2)).*

Trust as a key value. Trust between HR professionals and network coordinators was identified as an important value for collaboration *("when you talk about values then, it is really about knowing each other, trust and willingness to help each other"* (focus group, network *coordinators 2)).* From an organizational and personal level, a HR professional indicated that: *"It's about daring to make yourself vulnerable as a person and as an organization and feeling, experiencing and trusting that this will not be taken advantage of"* (focus group, HR *professionals 2).* In the HR professional's narratives, trust was also linked to openness *("trust is also about showing yourself and taking a genuine interest in others" (focus group, HR professional 2)).*

Hence, trust seems to encompass opening oneself up to others. Trust also involves keeping personal and sensitive information confidential *("that you also handle data or people's information confidentially" (focus group, HR professional 1)).* Trust also involves upholding promises *("keeping appointments are important factors in fostering trust" (focus group, HR professionals 2)).* Several HR professionals noted that commitment was important for establishing and maintaining trust *("what it [commitment] promotes is trust and therefore what hinders is if you would not keep your promises" (focus group, HR professionals 2)).*

Trust between HR professionals and employees was also identified as an important facilitator for reaping benefits *("as an advisor or as a supervisor you obviously have to create trust with the candidates" (focus group, HR professionals 1)).* In fact, network coordinators expressed that the network activities they offer are aimed at fostering a safe environment, grounded in trust, for employees.

Interaction and collaboration between stakeholders. Interaction between stakeholders was according to a network coordinator an important value *("the most important value is connecting" (focus group, network coordinator 2)).* Moreover, short, direct lines between stakeholders aid interaction. Additionally, the larger the network is, the more possibilities there to reach out to others ("*the benefit is, you have more outlets*" (focus group, HR professionals 1)). Additionally, network coordinators and HR professionals identified collaboration among network members as a key mechanism for network success *("as far as I am concerned, collaboration is really indispensable" (focus group, network coordinator 1)).* In order to collaborate, interactions are vital.

Frequent network events are beneficial for facilitating interactions *("with us they [HR professionals] also know how to find each other very easily, precisely because they normally meet physically once every 6 weeks" (focus group, network coordinators 2)).* Physical meetings create possibilities for increased interaction, however, many physical events were canceled or postponed due to Covid-19. Several digital tools (e.g. WhatsApp, LinkedIn groups) were used to help maintain interaction. Conversely, GDPR regulations may hinder the creation of new ties between network members. Additionally, small groups allow organizations with similar interests to connect *(". . .so that small groups of companies find each other to address certain themes" (focus group, HR professionals 1)).*

Connecting and fostering interaction between job candidates and representatives from organizations (e.g. HR professionals, recruiters, etc.) was identified by an HR professional as an essential mechanism for network success *(" the connection between employee and new employers or vice versa, so I think that is also where the strength of a good network lies, that you make that connection" (focus group, HR professionals 1))*. Furthermore, fostering interactions among employees can help employees develop their solicitation skills (*"they tell complete stories about, about their talents, about their motivations. And they do not realize that they are already practicing bits of future job interviews" (focus group, HR professionals 1))*.

Communication among stakeholders. Clear communication was also named as an important mechanism for the networks' functioning *("what I think is very much a factor is a concern for low barrier communication" (focus group, HR professionals 1))*. Communication allows for information and knowledge to spread within the network. It was identified by an HR professional as a crucial factor for goal actualization *("the frequency of communication helps realize goals" (focus group, HR professionals 1))*. Several respondents also noted that communicating success within the network is also an important factor for success (*"focusing on celebrating successes with each other" (focus group, network coordinators 2))*. Small networks are structurally better for fostering communication than large networks *("at a certain point the network becomes so big that you can no longer receive each other. That is going to be very, very difficult. . . to be in conversation with each other (focus group, HR professionals 1))*. Yet, network coordinators noted that GDPR rules impede communication among stakeholders.

Communication between network coordinators and within member organizations is sometimes lacking. Although HR professionals are responsible for communication between their network and member organizations, communication lines often end at the linking pin or the HR department and does not penetrate organizations. A network coordinator noted: *". . . a lot of our communication is just stuck with the HR people" (focus group, network coordinators 2)*. Consequently, organizations are not maximizing the benefits of network membership.

It was also noted by respondents that communication between network coordinators and HR professionals regarding the benefits of network membership and success stimulates commitment among network members: *("you should make the benefits of the network and participating in activities as clear as possible. . . and to demonstrate this a little bit, well, membership may cost something but you also get a lot in return. And that is an important point. The celebration of successes" (focus group, network coordinators 2))*. Some network coordinators try to measure success by asking HR professionals to fill in a questionnaire to register data in an online platform *(" we have a portal for members and matches are tracked there and also the number of network conversations(focus group, network coordinators 1))*. Others noted that empirical data is simply not collected *("so much happens, but it is not tracked" (focus group, network coordinator 1))*. However, network coordinators often encounter difficulties in measuring success *("that is not just in hard numbers. It is much more in the soft side. Knowing each other, knowledge sharing and so on, you cannot measure that very well" (focus group, network coordinators 1))*. In some cases, it is difficult to define what exactly counts as success. A network coordinator provided the following example regarding helping employees find a new job: *"when is something a match? Is the network conversation a match? Is the coffee conversation a match? Is the work conversation a match?" (focus group, network coordinators 1)*.

Establishing reciprocity. Reciprocity was identified by both network coordinators and HR professionals as an important principle in regulating interactions between member organizations. It is crucial for facilitating commitment and the longevity of a network *("you go there to bring something. Often also to get something. And the moment that the balance is not right you think, yes, I have nothing now. So then you are more inclined to drop out" (focus group, HR professionals 1))*.

Discussion

The current study sought to identify commonalities and unique aspects of the underlying factors and mechanisms that are critical for inter-organizational networks to succeed in fostering workers' sustainable employability. Based on the findings, we propose a model that provides an overview of identified factors and mechanisms (Figure 1). All factors are represented by the labels. The core of the figure contains the inter-personal factors and mechanisms that tie in with the ongoing collaborative interactions. The outer layers depict the more structural and environmental factors, which serve as a context for these interactions. Mechanisms denote relationships between factors within the same layer or across layers.

Our proposed model illustrates that the key constituting factors and mechanisms have commonalities and differences with frameworks found in the literature. Starting with the inter-personal factors and mechanisms, we identified interaction and collaboration, which has common ground with collaborative governance regimes (Emerson *et al.*, 2011; Ansell and Gash, 2008; Douglas *et al.*, 2020) and institutional fields (Phillips *et al.*, 2000; Scott, 2008; Zhang, 2023). The other two relational activities, communication and reciprocity, are also essential factors in inter-organizational networks. Based on our results, communication is a conduit for knowledge and information sharing. Reciprocity is the exchange of knowledge and resources (e.g. expertise, time, workers) between HR professionals. Within the literature, knowledge and its creation is identified as a success factor (Phillips *et al.*, 2000; Audretsch and Lehmann, 2005; Emerson *et al.*, 2011) and is considered to be the "currency of collaboration" (Emerson *et al.*, 2011, p. 16). In our model, these core inter-personal factors are interdependent and reinforce each other. They also express ongoing levels of relational activities between parties.
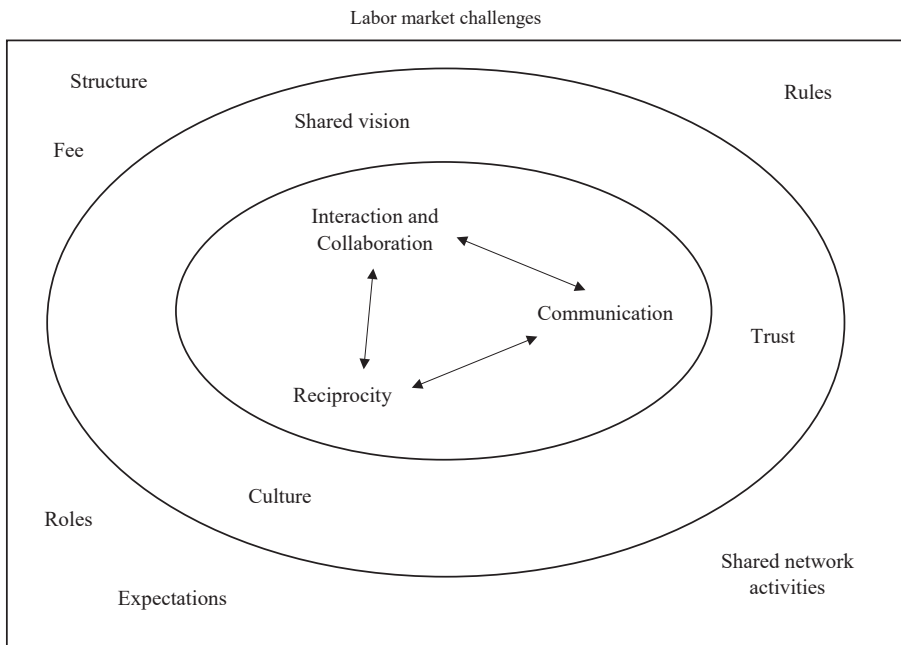
Figure 1.
A model of the factors and mechanisms for network success

Source(s): Authors' own creation

The other inter-personal factors, convivial culture, shared vision and trust are supportive factors that regulate the core inter-personal factors and create a shared mindset among stakeholders that support the relational activities. They seem to have a cognitive and/or affective basis. Furthermore, these factors seem to function as institutional fields theory proposes, i.e. mechanisms that shape the behavior of involved partners (Scott, 2008). First, a convivial culture may help create a safe environment where HR professionals feel comfortable sharing their ideas, knowledge and resources with others. In this sense, it may reduce barriers regarding communication, interaction and reciprocity. According to respondents, trust helps facilitate a safe environment, which is the cornerstone of a convivial culture. Trust has also been identified within the collaborative governance regime literature (Emerson *et al.*, 2011; Lindsay *et al.*, 2008) and institutional field literature (Zhang, 2023) as a key factor for network success.

Second, a shared vision helps establish common ground between stakeholders. It helps highlight the similarities between member organizations, which helps create bonds (Provan and Kenis, 2008; Vassie and Fuller, 2003; Zhang, 2023). The literature on institutional fields recognizes that interactions among stakeholders help establish and maintain a shared vision (Phillips *et al.*, 2000; Scott, 2008; Zhang, 2023). Communication and repeated interactions among stakeholders are important factors/mechanisms for the formation of a shared vision, which is a commonality between our results and those in the literature (Hardy *et al.*, 2005; Phillips *et al.*, 2000; Vassie and Fuller, 2003; Zhang, 2023). Yet, collaborative governance regimes models include additional factors and mechanisms for establishing common ground that were not explicitly found in the current study. These factors and mechanisms pertain to conflict resolution and making procedural decisions (Emerson *et al.*, 2011; Douglas *et al.*, 2020). An explanation is that in inter-organizational networks these processes and procedures occur in the steering committee. Members of the steering committee help shape the network's goals and provide the necessary plans to reach them. For example, they are responsible for creating the yearly agenda. Yet, in other types of networks, such as collaborative governance regimes, the responsibility may be diffused more among organizational network members (Emerson *et al.*, 2011), warranting such regulating mechanisms.

The structure of inter-organizational networks is designed to facilitate the inter-personal factors and mechanisms. Due to their alignment or fit with inter-personal factors, they can be regarded as contingency factors. For instance, a lack of informal rules and a flat structure may enable the forming of regulatory mechanisms that center on trust, and may also reinforce these structural configuration modes in turn. Moreover, network coordinators have explicitly structured their network in this configuration to foster mutual collaboration and cooperation between stakeholders. By doing so, organizational members are likely to have equal power (Furnari *et al.*, 2016; Gray *et al.*, 2022). This structure may help facilitate a shared vision and trust among member organizations (Provan and Kenis, 2008). Additionally, this structure provides stakeholders with short, direct lines of communication, which facilitates the accessibility of the knowledge and resources within the network (Wulf and Butel, 2017). Furthermore, shared network activities create a unique context whereby stakeholders can interact, collaborate, communicate and reciprocate with each other. Within inter-organizational networks, shared network activities provide a solid foundation that facilitates the inter-personal factors and mechanisms.

In addition to the general structure, the key roles and expectations of network coordinators and HR professionals are also important to consider. This parallels with the importance of leadership by the 'entrepreneur' in the literature on entrepreneurial ecosystems. Yet, the roles and expectations for HR professionals seem to be participative. The role of HR professionals is to act as a gatekeeper between their organization and the network. HR professionals are expected to be committed and actively participate within the

network. According to respondents, the annual membership fee helps foster commitment. In the literature, commitment has been shown to have strong linkages with trust, a convivial culture and interaction/collaboration (Emerson *et al.*, 2011; Lindsay *et al.*, 2008).

Apart from the inner workings of inter-organizational networks, it is also important to recognize that they operate within a larger context, which encompasses societal challenges (Emerson *et al.*, 2011; Phillips *et al.*, 2000; Stam and van de Ven, 2021; Stam, 2015). During the focus groups, network coordinators and HR professionals noted that labor market challenges (e.g. labor shortages, workers' skills required in the future, complexities in specific regions) are the most pressing societal challenges that shape inter-organizational networks. These issues also fit with the notion of grand challenges, which are highly complex issues that create uncertainty and extend beyond the boundaries of a single organization, thereby stimulating the need for organizations to (continue to) collaborate (Ferraro *et al.*, 2015; Gray *et al.*, 2022). Here, structural factors are more likely to buffer against the labor market challenges due to the little hierarchy and informal structure of inter-organizational networks. From this perspective, structural factors are contingent and shaped by environmental factors, such as challenges in the labor market (Emerson *et al.*, 2011). Additionally, environmental factors affect multiple organizations and may therefore create a commonality between organizations. This may help solidify a shared vision among member organizations (Emerson *et al.*, 2011; Phillips *et al.*, 2000; Vassie and Fuller, 2003; Zhang, 2023). Furthermore, the necessity of addressing these challenges may prompt organizations to collaborate with other organizations (Bakker *et al.*, 2018).

Theoretical contributions
This study contributes to the literature on organizational networks and sustainable employability and careers in several ways.

First, we contribute to the literature on inter-organizational networks. There is a vast amount of literature streams on networks such as strategic alliances, joint ventures, partnerships and subcontracting (Barringer and Harrison, 2000; Provan *et al.*, 2007). However, the new type of network central to our study is not well-studied and lacks an encompassing framework. Our model helps fill this gap by mapping the factors and mechanisms for success at the network level that are regarded by key stakeholders. It demonstrates features that clearly link to related network literature domains, such as entrepreneurial ecosystems (e.g. Roundy *et al.*, 2017; Stam *et al.*, 2012), institutional fields (e.g. Scott, 2008) and collaborative governance regimes (e.g. Emerson *et al.*, 2011). At the same time, the constellation of factors and mechanisms is unique. For instance, acting upon new developments in the labor market is possible because of a flat structure and informal rules that are at play. Trust, which is imperative for these kinds of networks as human capital is precious in a tight labor market, can be nurtured under these conditions. This reinforces the structural defaults of these networks. Hence, our model adds a perspective on how this new form of inter-organizational network functions and can aid in understanding why some of these are successful and others are not.

Second, we add to the literature about sustainable employability and careers by drawing attention to the role of these networks that shape workers' careers and sustainable employability. Although sustainable employability and careers are shaped by contextual factors (Gazier, 1998; Donald *et al.*, 2020), past research has mainly focused on the organizational level (Semeijn *et al.*, 2015; Pak *et al.*, 2019; Ybema *et al.*, 2017, Martini *et al.*, 2023; Utrilla *et al.*, 2022). Yet, new initiatives, such as inter-organizational networks, are emerging that transcend the boundaries of single organizations (Bakker *et al.*, 2018; Curşeu *et al.*, 2021; Van Gestel *et al.*, 2018). Our study is one of the few that explicitly studies inter-organizational networks that center on addressing human capital challenges as a unique and novel setting

with the potential to shape workers' sustainable employability. Broadening the scope of the contextual factors is important as career literature and employability research in particular have been criticized for overemphasizing the role of 'agency' in comparison to 'structure' (Forrier *et al.*, 2009; Delva *et al.*, 2021). The networks central to our study add to our understanding of the 'structural opportunities' for fostering workers' sustainable employability. They can be seen as a new contextual layer in addition to the prevailing labor market conditions and organizational career management in which careers unfold. In this regard, understanding future careers implies taking this multi-level embeddedness into account as well. This will also give impetus to future research. Inter-organizational networks are not only just another factor, as our study also points to the occurrence of possible complex interactions between stakeholders in the network (e.g. external counselor) and people from one's host organization (e.g. HR professional, line manager). This emphasizes that understanding the development (or impediment) of workers' sustainable employability may require reliance on relational perspectives that center on exchanges between parties (e.g. social exchange theory), which complements dominant competence perspectives (e.g. human capital theory) in sustainable employability literature (Fugate *et al.*, 2021).

Implications

This study has implications for network coordinators and managers from organizations. By identifying the factors, mechanisms and dynamics within inter-organizational networks, network coordinators can make informed decisions regarding their network. For example, if they are considering how to structure their network, they will have insights into how their proposed ideas will impact the success of their network. Thus, they are more adept at optimizing their network to maximize its success. This may increase the legitimacy of the network, which may increase its longevity (Provan *et al.*, 2007; Provan and Kenis, 2008). From an organizational perspective, the results from this study can help HR professionals and their organizations understand how they can reap the most benefits from their membership. For example, they should make an effort to actively participate in network activities and be willing to share their resources with other network members. By doing so, they will have increased access to knowledge and resources that may help them fulfill their HR duties. For example, by actively participating in the network HR professionals may have access to the talent they need to fill their job vacancies. This may help increase organizational performance (Brunello and Wruuck, 2021; Molloy and Barney, 2015).

This study may also have implications for career scholars. The structure of inter-organizational networks may democratize the opportunities for career development that workers in small and medium-sized companies have compared to workers in multi-nationals. In this sense, perspectives on careers that embrace the interaction between structure and agency, like Gazier (1998), are highly relevant to better understand contemporary careers. This perspective can assist managers in understanding how workers' environment (e.g. organization, network, society) influences their sustainable employability. This may enhance their understanding of structural factors and the implications of their decisions on sustainable employability.

Limitations and future research

Although this study has many strengths, it is important to consider its limitations. First, the organizations represented in this study are active in at least one inter-organizational network. It is possible that organizations that participate in inter-organizational networks are more positive about inter-organizational networks than organizations that are not active, which were not included in our sample. Furthermore, not all inter-organizational networks were represented. However, the researchers strived to have a good representation by ensuring that

the characteristics of the participating networks reflected: large and small, inter- and intra-sectoral, and a variety of cities and regions in the Netherlands. Since the inter-organizational networks operate in the Netherlands, cultural differences that may affect processes required for optimal inter-organizational network success were not explored. New studies may want to explore the robustness of our findings in other cultural settings.

Second, snowball sampling was used to identify and invite HR professionals and network coordinators, thereby potentially increasing commonalities in viewpoints among respondents. Additionally, some participants were not able to attend the focus group due to unforeseen circumstances. Although most of them were interviewed or provided written responses afterward, for two potential participants no information could be gathered. This may have led to a loss of unexplored insights and opinions. Additionally, this study reflects network coordinators' and HR professionals' viewpoints. Future research could consider workers' perceptions and experiences of participating in network events to uncover additional barriers and facilitators.

Third, measures were taken to ensure that participants felt safe to speak their mind. For example, participants were reminded that no identifying information will be included in reports or publications. However, it is possible that groupthink occurred during the focus groups. Group think is a psychological phenomenon that occurs when group members reach a consensus without critically evaluating other alternatives and can lead to a loss of unique individual perspectives (Boateng, 2012). Future research could explore in depth the various stakeholder perceptions at the individual, organizational and network level. In this study, we only focused on the factors and mechanisms perceived at the network level. The researchers believe adequate saturation was achieved in this focal area because no new themes emerged during the last two focus groups. Rather, more nuances and examples related to the existing themes were discovered. This is aligned with the literature on the saturation point of focus groups (Guest *et al.*, 2017).

Fourth, due to the Covid-19 crisis (January 30, 2020–May 5, 2023) (United Nations, 2023) and the broad coverage of networks throughout the Netherlands, the focus groups and interviews were hosted online. In this setting, it can be harder for the moderator and participants to read each other's body language. This may reduce interactions between participants and may increase the likelihood of interruptions. To address this issue, participants were encouraged to turn their webcam on. Furthermore, in an online environment, it is impossible to reduce distractions which may lead to a loss of input. To account for this, the moderator called on specific participants to help keep them engaged in the conversation. Although the procedures used can remedy possible biases from having online focus groups and interviews, future studies are encouraged to gather data in face-to-face settings.

Fifth, our study only considered perceived network success at the network level. Future research could consider how network success can be defined at the organizational or individual level. At the individual level, a study could consider the impact of worker participation in network activities on their sustainable employability and career opportunities and the role of factors (e.g. trust, job-fit, job satisfaction, having a protean career orientation, the quality of the relationship between the worker and their supervisor, perceived organizational support, etc.) that could strengthen the potential impact. This would provide a unique perspective on the success of inter-network success regarding their goal achievement. At the organizational level, future research could consider the impact of inter-organizational membership on organizational outcomes related to sustainable employability (e.g. absenteeism rate, organizational performance, ability to attract and maintain talent, etc.) and the role of influential factors in this relationship such as: leadership, the skills and abilities of HR professionals (e.g. strategic thinking, political skills), organizational climate or culture, etc.).

In addition to focusing on outcomes, this study also provides a solid foundation for additional avenues for future research on how collaboration in inter-organizational networks can evolve over time. Our study identified the factors and mechanisms for network success, as perceived by key stakeholders. A follow-up study could explore over time how interdependencies between factors and mechanisms unfold and thereby increase insight into the formation, development and termination of these inter-organizational networks. A longitudinal design with participants could provide such insights. Also, a qualitative case study on organizations that are network members could also serve this purpose. Additionally, as our study has an explorative design, follow-up studies could adopt a quantitative approach and use a larger sample of HR professionals in which key factors, identified in this study are measured and their impact tested.

Conclusion

Inter-organizational networks are a promising platform for organizations that seek to foster sustainable employability for their workers. Within inter-organizational networks, organizations collaborate to solve grand challenges in relation to human capital (e.g. labor shortages, worker skills required in the future, complexities in specific regions). The success of inter-organizational networks is contingent on environmental (challenges stemming from the labor market), structural (a network's flat structure, flat fee, lack of informal rules, the allocation of roles and expectations for stakeholders and shared network activities) and inter-personal (communication among stakeholders, establishing reciprocity, interaction and collaboration between stakeholders, the valuation of trust, a convivial culture and shared vision among stakeholders) factors and mechanisms. Although other forms of networks exist in the literature (e.g. collaborative governance regimes, institutional fields and entrepreneurial ecosystems) the factors, mechanisms and dynamics required for success show similarities and important differences. This suggests that inter-organizational networks for sustainable employability are unique and can provide a new perspective on collaboration among organizations.

Note

1. In the Netherlands a foundation is a legal entity that has a deed which lists its statues (i.e. it states which rules and regulations apply to the legal entity as well as who is responsible and for what). An association does not have a deed drawn up.

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Appendix

Topic Guide (1 h 30 m)

1. Introduction

- Introduce researchers
- Study topic
- Explanation of study aims and objectives
- Explain confidentiality and anonymity
- Explain recording, length, reporting and data storage
- Explain consent
    - Withdraw at anytime
    - Do not have to answer questions
    - Value of participating
- Questions from participants
- Check if participants are ok with continuing

2. Background

- Please introduce yourself

3. Core Questions

For the following questions, take the current period as reference, but also clarify any difference pre-corona period.

- What exactly do the networks you participate in do?
    – What are the activities of the network in which you participate?
    – What do network members share with each other?
    – Who is responsible for what?
    – Who is responsible for career development/employability of employees?
- How are the networks you participate in organized?
    – How is the network structured?
    – How would you describe the culture within your network?
    – What are guiding principles for participants and network members?
- What are the benefits for employees and employers?
- What factors <u>promote</u> the achievement of the goals?
- What factors <u>hinder</u> the achievement of the goals?

Let us reflect for a moment on what the corona crisis implies for the networks in which you participate.

- Are there any new opportunities/opportunities or difficulties for your networks since the Corona crisis?

4. Conclusion

- Do you have any other comments? Have we missed anything important?
- Thank participants

Source(s): Authors own creation.

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