

Understanding labour market attachment: A systematic review and reconceptualization

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Policy-makers have highlighted rising labour demand and decreasing labour supply as a critical challenge for many labour markets (Theunissen, Vansteenkiste, & Sels, 2018): They have traditionally focused upon activating the unemployed and more recently, because of increasingly tight labour markets, also the inactive population. In research to date, the notion “labour market attachment” (LMA) has attracted attention against this background. LMA reflects a person's proximity to the labour market (Virtanen et al., 2011): The idea is that individuals who are more attached are more likely to be activated. Our aim is twofold, namely (1) to review the research on LMA and (2) to critically evaluate and deepen the notion of LMA.

First, we systematically review 154 scientific articles on LMA with a specific focus upon (1) how labour market attachment is conceptualized and measured, (2) underlying themes, and (3) target groups. Results show that (1) labour market attachment is conceived as an objective indicator of one's career, measured by for example current employment status. (2) Labour market attachment is associated with labour market transitions (e.g., unemployment, retirement), work-life issues (e.g., family expansion, childcare, parental leave policies) and health (e.g., sickness and incapacity for work) (3) The target groups are diverse but share a focus upon precarious groups in the labour market, for example ex-prisoners, women, cancer patients and first- and second-generation immigrants.

While we definitely see value in the notion of LMA, we also see some gaps in research. First, LMA is conceptualized and measured in objective terms, while attachment carries psychological loading. Second, LMA appears fairly static, while attachment is likely the result of previous experiences with work and the labour market. In response, we advance an alternative conceptualization of LMA which addresses those issues. This conceptualization is embedded in the broader literature (e.g., with reference to job search) and based on interviews with individuals who are inactive yet with very different experiences.

Insight in LMA can broaden our view on sustainable careers and help understand why people make transitions in and out of the labour market.

References

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