

# Sustainable Employability: Literature Review

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## ABSTRACT

**Purpose** The paper aims to provide an insight into Sustainable Employability, through an in depth literature review of 101 papers. The paper helps in identifying the gaps through the review for future researchers to study employee and student sustainability.

**Methodology** A systematic review was done by researching 101 articles from multiple sources and journals. Further, these papers were categorized on the basis of the industries. The conclusion was made from different perspectives pertaining to Sustainable Employability.

**Findings** From the literature review and qualitative analysis, 4 major factors were identified, viz. Employability, Work-Ability, Vitality and Human Resource Management, out of which 3 vital factors were identified and studied further. The paper also discovered the meaning and significance of sustainability from different perspectives, such as, employee, employer, student, and teacher, psychological.

**Research Limitations** The framework introduced during the qualitative research analysis through extensive literature review, further needs to be validated using experimental research.

**Practical Implications** The study offers a structured framework and guidelines for organizations, universities and institutions to impart sustainability in employment.

**Originality/value** The paper is an in depth analysis of the literature review and seeks to classify the factors responsible for the sustainable development which will be of significance to the students and organizations having an interest in sustainability.

**Article type** Review paper

**Keywords** Sustainable employability, Training, Employability, Workability, Sustainability, Human Resource

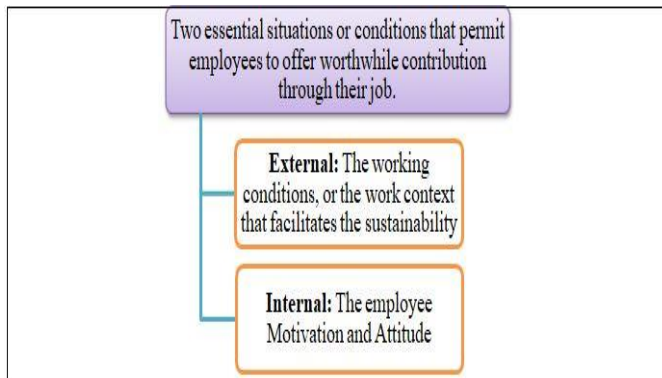
## I. INTRODUCTION

Amongst the various researchers, sustainability has been defined from multiple dimensions; some have defined it from the economical perspectives, others have defined it from the environmental perspectives, that the environment and the natural resources must be judiciously used in order to retain them for the future, and how these resources must now be restored in one or the other form for coming generations, on the other hand there are other researchers who have worked upon the sustainability from the developmental perspective. The few other studies focused on the ageing labor market [9]. The review discusses that there is a profound increase in the need for the protection of sustainable employability due to the decreased early retirements [2].

The literature review results prove that the workers who are highly employable have up to date skills and knowledge along with the capability of continuous improvement, however, in this paper, the sustainability is being discussed

from the teacher, employer, student, employee and psychological perspective. Coming so far, two essential questions arise which one might raise, first, what sustainable development in terms of employability really mean? And second, why is there a profound need to study the concept?

According to the literature review, it can be stated that the sustainable employability is the most broadly used concepts across multiple contexts [50]. According to a study, most of the prior researches in the field of sustainability were based on Individual difference framework in order to explore Employability [35]. The study reveals that sustainable employability is a concept which means that the employees are in a position to gain concrete opportunities as their capabilities. Employees are able to safeguard their health and welfare while enjoying the conditions which permit them to offer their valuable contribution to the employers through their jobs in present and in future. For this to happen, it requires the following conditions [89].



**Figure (1)** Conditions Impacting Employee Performance

**Source:** Created by Self

Majority of the studies on the concept of sustainability and sustainable employability are conducted by [74]. According to the literature, following are the definitions being given to sustainable employability.

1. According to [88] during the employees' working life, they are able to arrange, gather and dispose of the realizable possibilities and the required necessary conditions in order to maintain their functioning in the present and the future profession, while being healthy.
2. According to [33] sustainable employability means the conditions pertaining to employee mental, physical and contextual situations that determine their present and prospective labor market position. In other words, Sustainable employability is the employees' optimized ability to maintain the current and obtain the future work.

In order to protect the longevity of a business it is important to promote sustainability amongst the employees [61]. To produce authentic and successful results, the management is required to make the employees feel engaged at the workplace, giving them encouraging work culture; they must be able to balance work and life [42]. Sustainability is a concept far from employee retention; it is motivating employees, recognizing their work, working for maintaining their health and well being, and providing them enough opportunities for their growth and success to help them retain their interest and contribution towards their work [28]. The key objective of this review research is to provide a wide ranging literature review on Sustainable Employability that has been conducted. 100 articles have been collected in this work from varied referred journals.

The purpose of this study is to:

- Describe what factors affect sustainable employability.
- Classify sustainable employability research articles according to their methodologies.
- Find the gaps in sustainable employability literature.

## II. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

### SOURCING OF ARTICLES:

The articles have been sourced from multiple journals and publishing houses. The journal list is given in Appendix 1.

### ARTICLE INCLUSION CRITERIA:

The articles have been included on the basis of the following criteria

1. Concepts
  - a. Sustainable Employability
  - b. Work ability
  - c. Vitality
  - d. Employability
  - e. Human resource and sustainable employability
  - f. Perceptual analysis
2. Citation: High citation papers have been referred, ranging between citations 304 to 2082.

## III. LITERATURE REVIEW

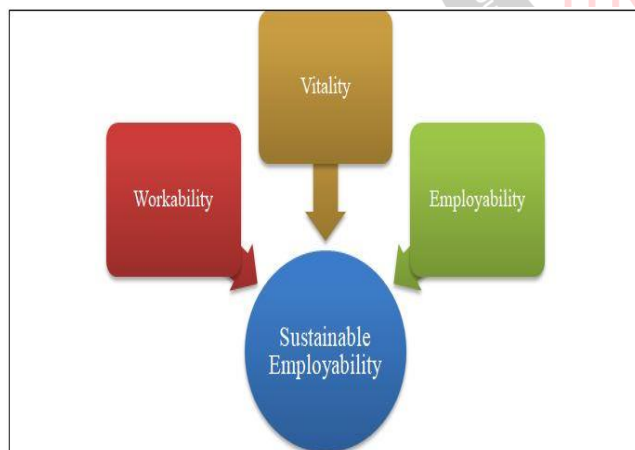
In this paper the literature pertaining to sustainable employability (SE) and relative factors have been studied. A total of 101 papers have been referred, from 84 journals have been studied, majorly from International Journal of Occupational Safety and Ergonomics, Industrial and Commercial Training and Scandinavian Journal of Work, Environment & Health and peer reviewed journal. The journal list is given in Appendix 1. The entire literature review has been classified on process and content basis. Contents include Work ability, employability, Human resource, vitality and perception. Processes include the framework and models being developed by the researchers and implemented to study in detail the various components and their interrelations.

### SUSTAINABLE EMPLOYABILITY

In the last decade a lot of researchers have produced a number of articles, with a primary focus on encouraging sustainable employability amongst the students, employees, employers of diverse occupations [20]. Interestingly, a lot of authors have worked upon the context, and have given multiple factors responsible for promoting sustainable employability, some of them have focused on education section, primarily focusing on graduates and post graduates and other have shifted their focus on old age group and young professionals. On view considers that lifelong learning boosts and influences the sustainability [4]. The other view considers work ability as an important factor in bringing sustainability at work place and for same purpose introduced a work ability house [5]. These authors, further discussed the house, in order to achieve sustainability, an individual first must step on to the ground floor which is the health of the individual, if a person is healthy, he is able to manage work more accurately, the first floor comprises of

the qualification, education and the skills, and it is stated by the authors that a person is only able to manage the work demands if he has the required skill set to perform and only then will he be motivated to work more [101]. Similar to the other authors' point of view, they also mentions lifelong learning as a vital factor to be able to adapt to the given circumstances and inevitable changes in the organization. The factors responsible for reduced work ability are less exercise, musculoskeletal diseases, older age, high BMI, working in jobs that require high physical and mental jobs, and poor working environment [6]. Most scholars agree to the fact that in order to improve employability training and development plays an important role [92]. According to the reviews technical and non technical training improves the vitality and health component which directly affects the employability and helps enhancing it. Vitality is defined as a feeling of fit and strong [70]. If a person feels like going to work, and enjoys long working hours tirelessly, with a mental resilience is bound to have high vitality factors, these factors can now be linked to a person's mental and physical health issues and their lifestyle, which in turn affects the person's performance at work, consequently their employability and work ability [78]. Therefore, it can be summarized that the factors responsible for sustainable employability are health and vitality factors, healthy relationship between an employer and an employee lifelong learning, the workplace culture and the working environment [32]. These factors are needed to be measured periodically and monitor to sustain the employability and work ability of an employee.

Further, from the research review, 3 factors have been identified which affect the sustainable employability.



**Figure (2)** Factors Impacting Employee Sustainable Employability

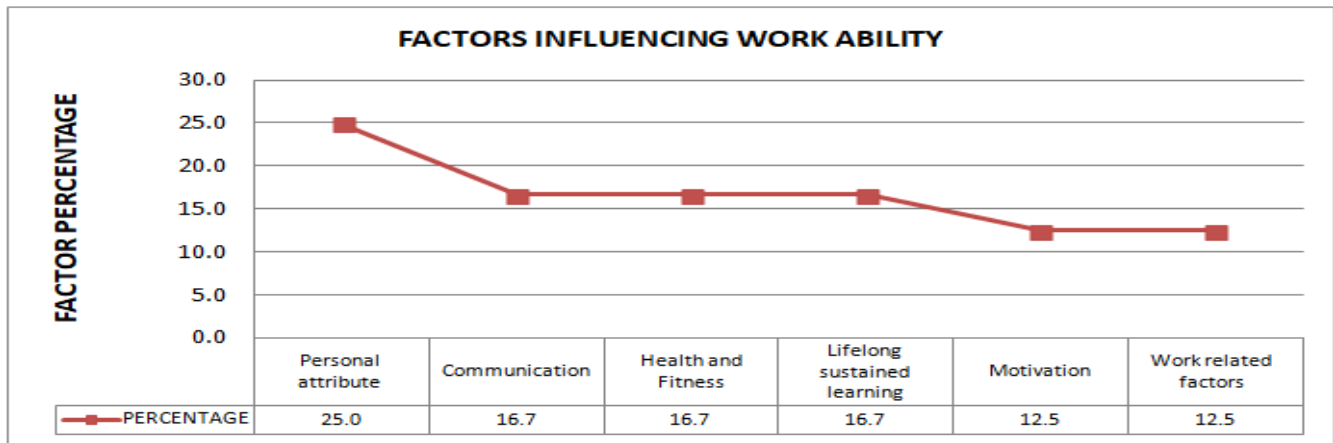
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### WORK ABILITY

According to the review, the work ability is defined as an individuals' capacity to cope up at a given point of time

with a given task in hand [19]. A lot of researches have been conducted so far with an intention to preserve the employee work ability [14]. Out of many different ways, job rotation is identified one of them to preserve the ability to work as the employees do not have to perform the repetitive job of constant lifting, pulling objects or pushing them which helps preserve their work ability for longer duration [44]. It is identified through literature that if an employee has high work ability in young and old age, it is analyzed that there will be less risk to develop musculoskeletal diseases, leaves due to sickness and the possibilities to early retirement [54]. However, on the other hand, the low work ability negatively impacts the individual and company productivity, and in turn this affects the company's ability to compete in the external and global market [96]. Hence, work ability can be seen as a relationship between the physical and mental health status of an employee and the work environment of the workplace. For this reason, the blue collar workers have less work ability as compared to the white collar workers. Similarly, work ability is also associated with the age, during the older days the work ability reduces, therefore it is a need to keep the work environment healthy and promote healthy living habits [3]. The work ability has been given a conceptual model by [44], according to his report; the background is based on the stress strain model and concept, where it is the responsibility of the human resource department to manage the job design and job rotation in a healthy and safe manner to prevent the loss of work ability [11]. In order to prevent the work ability, it is imperative to assess and manage it, particularly during the initial and the late working life, consequently Work ability Index was developed and its validity and reliability is tested for further research and practice [18]. From this research onwards it is indicated that to improve and maintain the work ability it is essential to focus on factors such as values, attitude, internal and external motivation and competence other than the health and well being. Apart from these factors it is the employee himself, the supervisors and the ergonomics who influence the individuals' work ability [40]. From the literature review, following factors have been identified which influence the work ability [51].

Education, Physical fitness, work environment, career adaptability, Positive attitude [76], Positive Interpersonal relations [43], Health and Fitness, sense of self identity, financial circumstances, Job security, Less physically demanding jobs, Less Fatigue [56], Time Management, Team Work, Motivation, Compensation, Reward, support from the supervisor and the possibility of development, Vitality, Quality Sleep [25].



Graph (1) Figure showcasing the top 6 factors which implement the work ability

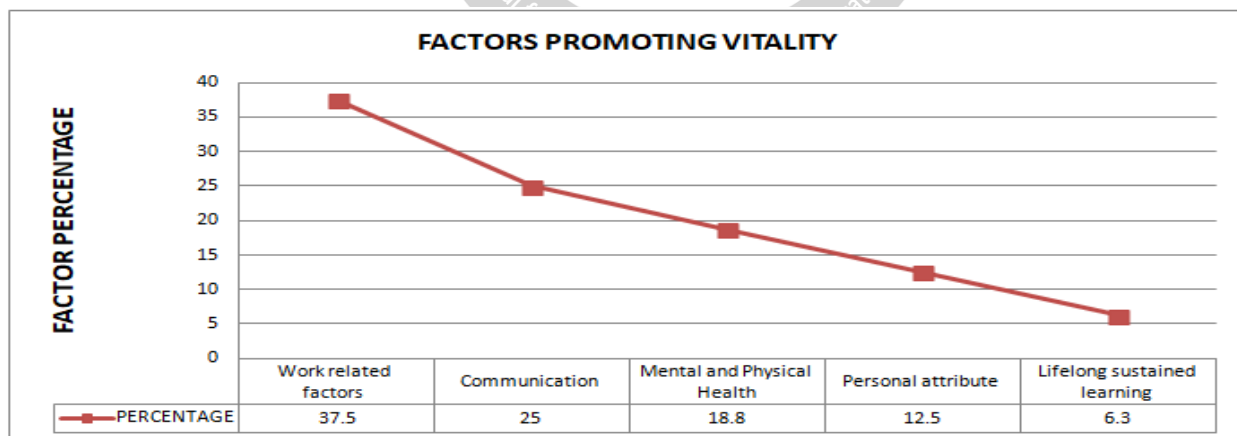
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According to [91], work ability is the ability of the employees to be able to work physically, mentally and socially. The literature reveals that to gain and maintain the work ability, apart communication and health and fitness as discussed, the third and the top most important factor include the personal attributes are the important factors on which the employee needs to work, which include, Alertness and concentration [93], Financial circumstances, Personal identity of the employee, Quality sleep which enables a fresh start every day, Team work, Time management and Vitality [57].

### VITALITY

According to the literature review, employee vitality is the energy that they feel at their workplace. Feeling strong and fit is another factor that is associated with the vitality [13]. For an individual to possess vitality, he/she must be willing to work long and tirelessly, both mentally and physically [16]. Some authors also mentioned perseverance and motivation as other important factors to be present, according to them, if during the unpleasant and unexpected circumstances an individual must have the perseverance ability and intrinsic motivation to handle the circumstances. In addition to this, an important part of individual's sustainable employability is vitality [10]. Other literature from different sources also mentions vitality as an important factor in developing and maintaining sustainable employability [31]. From the literature review, following factors have been identified which influence the Vitality.

Psychological safety, Involvement in work, alertness, employee performance, quality sleep, Work engagement [15], Domain specific training, improved working conditions, Health, Retirement benefits, Less Physical Work Load, Freedom, [39].



Graph (2) Figure showcasing the top 5 factors which help promote Vitality

Source: Created by Self

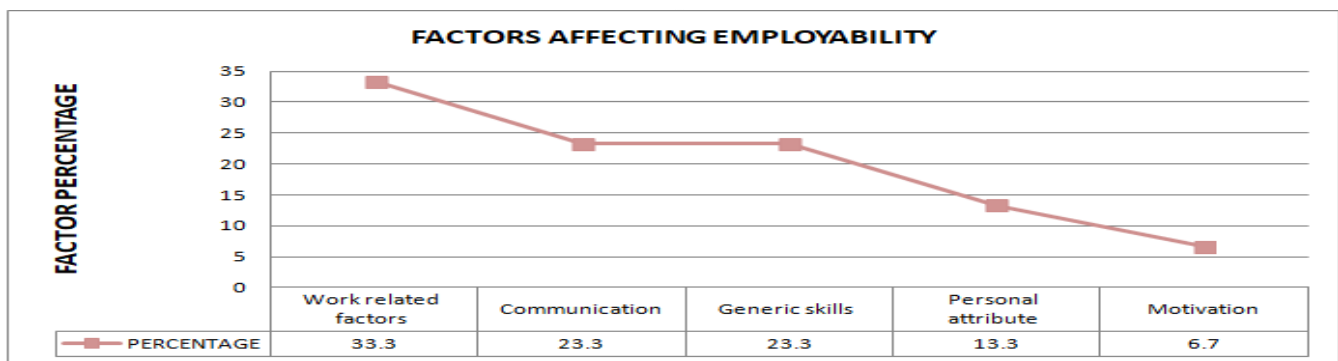
The second important factor to achieve employee sustainability is vitality; according to [8], Vitality is the feeling of energetic, strong and fit at work. The willingness and motivation to carry out work, along with the mental and physical ability and resilience is also needed. According to the review in order to achieve employee vitality, the top three factors considered important are work related factors, communication and Mental and physical health. Therefore, apart from the role of the employer in providing the good working conditions and factors such as job security, job satisfaction, retirement plan. The employee is responsible for the mental and physical health.



## EMPLOYABILITY

The concept of employability is not new, it is into discussion amongst the scholars from around 1950s [49]. Nevertheless, it is since 1990 that the researchers have started the empirical studies pertaining to the concept. According to [21] employability is defined as the continuously performing, obtaining or generating work by optimally using the capabilities. [38], according to these authors, employability has 5 dimensions, “Balance, Anticipation & Optimization, Corporate sense, Personal flexibility and Occupational expertise”, each dimension is further explained as, the balance between the employer and employees’ interest is measured to bring them in line. Anticipation and optimization is anticipating, planning, preparing and optimizing self for the future changes in the workplace in the best and creative possible way in order to receive the best career outcomes [58]. Corporate sense is about being a part of the team and integrating in the culture. Personal flexibility is being flexible to changes in the organization and adopting them. Occupational expertise is defined as acquiring the specific required skills and knowledge set for the specific domain [95]. Therefore, it is the responsibility of the employee, employer, and a student to create and maintain the employability to sustain the current job and obtain the future professional career. Several studies has worked around the development and defining the employability concept [18]. The concept has been studied from various perspectives (Organizational, employer, employee, and student, teacher, psychological and industrial); however, there are a few studies which have tried integrating the perspectives into their review analysis [63].

Occupational expertise, Anticipation and optimization, personal flexibility, corporate sense, balance, Interpersonal skills, Communication, listening, Problem solving [75], Time management, Generic skills, motivation, Soft skills, Leadership, work ethics, Attitude and appearance, Vitality, work engagement [60].



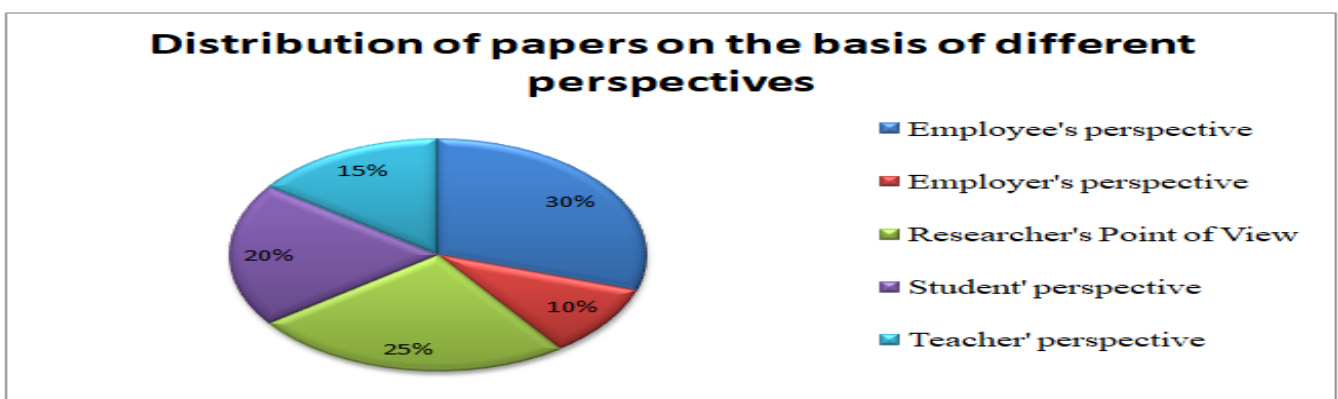
Graph (3) Figure showcasing the top 5 factors which affect the employability

Source: Created by Self

According to the literature review, the top three factors important to achieve employability identified are work related factors, the communication and interpersonal networking and relationship among the employees and the Generic skills [7]. Predominantly for the graduate employability it is imperative that the Human resource management works towards providing the required and likely work environment to allow candidates to work for the company, the employees hold the responsibility to work upon the communication and interpersonal skills enhancement, the colleges and universities require to design and inculcate a curriculum that involve the generic skills, and other soft skills necessary for employment [100].

## PERSPECTIVE ANALYSIS

The next segment of the paper include analysis from different perspectives



Graph (4) Figure showcasing the distribution of the review articles on the basis of different perspectives

Source: Created by Self

## EMPLOYEE PERSPECTIVE

Physical and mental health has been considered as one of the major factor influencing an employee's employability and work ability. According to the research, less active employees with less engagement in sports report more about their poor health status [36]. On comparing the employees' mental and physical status, it was found that the work characteristics are directly associated to employee's mental health status and obesity is a key reason impacting the employability [86]. Previous studies also gave importance to maintaining good health behavior [55]. According to the employees' perception in a study, long absence due to sickness is predicted by unhealthy behavior [72]. However, other researchers have given importance to factors such as working conditions and workplace environment other than the health issues [90]. Further in the research it has been found that the individuals suffering with back ache and artery disease also suffer with poor mental performance as compared to the healthy individuals who are more productive with high performance level. A decrease in performance due to mental stress and disorder influences and aggravates the chronic diseases and physical work ability to perform on job [97].

## EMPLOYER PERSPECTIVE

The literature showcasing the employer perspective focused on the reducing the physical load for the employees and to generate alternative jobs for those employees who are no more able to carry out the physically demanding job. The alternative view considers that employers are taking frequent measures in order to encourage favorable working environment and employee health and well being, according to these researches, lesser measures were targeted towards personality development and management. [63] Gave several factors influencing the sustainable employability and needs to be taken care of, such as, the economic factors, consumer demand, company vision, mission and culture, employee demand, rules and regulations and time, manpower and expertise [80]. Thus, it can be identified and summarized that the employers demand a manifold skill sets from the candidates, such as,

- Academic skills including, research, writing, preparation for exams and time management
- Extracurricular activities: joining clubs, volunteering in public and school activities, engaging in personal interests and hobbies and school representatives [84].
- Activities involving practical on the job learning, example, internships, meeting employers, doing part time jobs, working on receiving governmental and private support for entrepreneurship

Most scholars and Industries agree to the fact that employers look for the presence of soft skills and personal attributes as compared to the university attended, the subjects chosen and the degrees collected [69]. Other studies support the same supports the same perspective and highlights the fact that 86% board members keep puts personal attributes and skills on their top priority, only 10% weightage was given to the university attended and the rest was scored by the degree [87].

## TEACHER PERSPECTIVE

The student's future depends upon the educational qualification, as the work culture and job requirements are changing continuously, there is a need to change the qualification, skills and competency required to perform the job [94]. Due to the fact that there is a constant shift it becomes equally imperative for the college graduates to work towards their skills in order to excel at entry level jobs, having the required skills will further help them achieve employability and sustainability [24]. It has been identified that the student's vitality is influenced by the community engaged work they do. The work that engages the community helps the students create a mutual benefit relationship between the faculty and the community partners, and also help them achieve the scholarly connections [79].

## STUDENT PERSPECTIVE

Recent researches have confirmed that many researchers have defined employability, yet there is a lack of universally accepted definition for the concept. Therefore the views of students are also narrow in comparison to the views being portrayed in the literature [68]. Employability, from the students perspective is a short term goal to achieve, it majorly revolves around finding the job and getting away with unemployment [12]. However, literature supports it from a wider perspective, many researchers have worked upon in this area and found evidences that employability must be considered from the long term perspective, it is about maintaining the same quality work, and sustainability of the graduate level employability [82].

## RESEARCHERS' VIEW POINT

[12] Proposed a conceptual model to understand the graduate's perspective on the employability and sustainability.

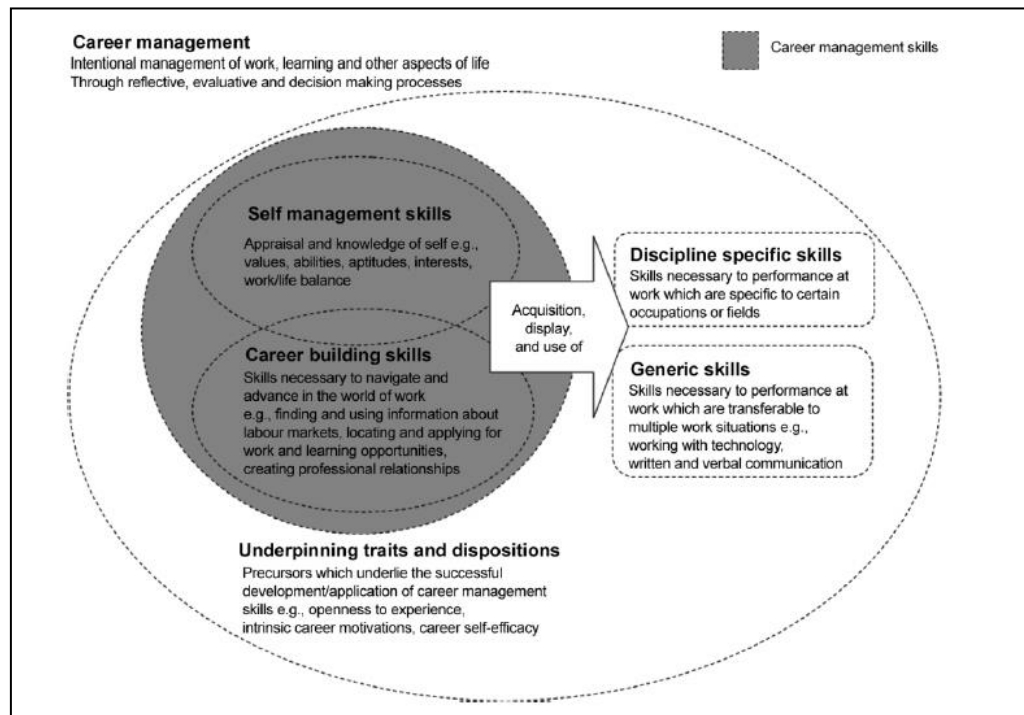


Figure 3 Conceptual Model of Graduate attribute for employability including career management skills.

Source: [12]

Several studies have shown that employability skills are significant in obtaining and maintaining the obtained work [62]. The skills are divided into two broad segments, the generic skills and the domain specific technical skills which are required in order to perform the work. For example, career management skills which are further divided into two categories, the self management skills including, self motivation, time management, team management and the career building skills such as resume building, gaining experience, communication skills and acquiring technical skills such as IT and other necessary domain specific skills. These skills play a vital role in employability [12].

The researches though, support the view that the Underpinning traits and dispositions play a central part in the development of the career management skills and their application to the practical experiences [97]. However, there are certain theorists, they differ the view whether these skills are needed to be developed during the students' higher education [83]. Nevertheless, the scholars found evidences and facts supporting the positive relationship between the career management skill and other traits in the higher education and good graduate employability. There are also evidences concerning the skills and higher level of career success. In addition, [89] examined that the students having high degree of internal motivation and career enhancement skills are more prone to accomplish educational scores and strong results professionally. They are also more likely to attain work experiences and smooth, high school to work transition. It has been further studied that these students are more satisfied as compared and perform better than others and achieve sustainability in their career [98].

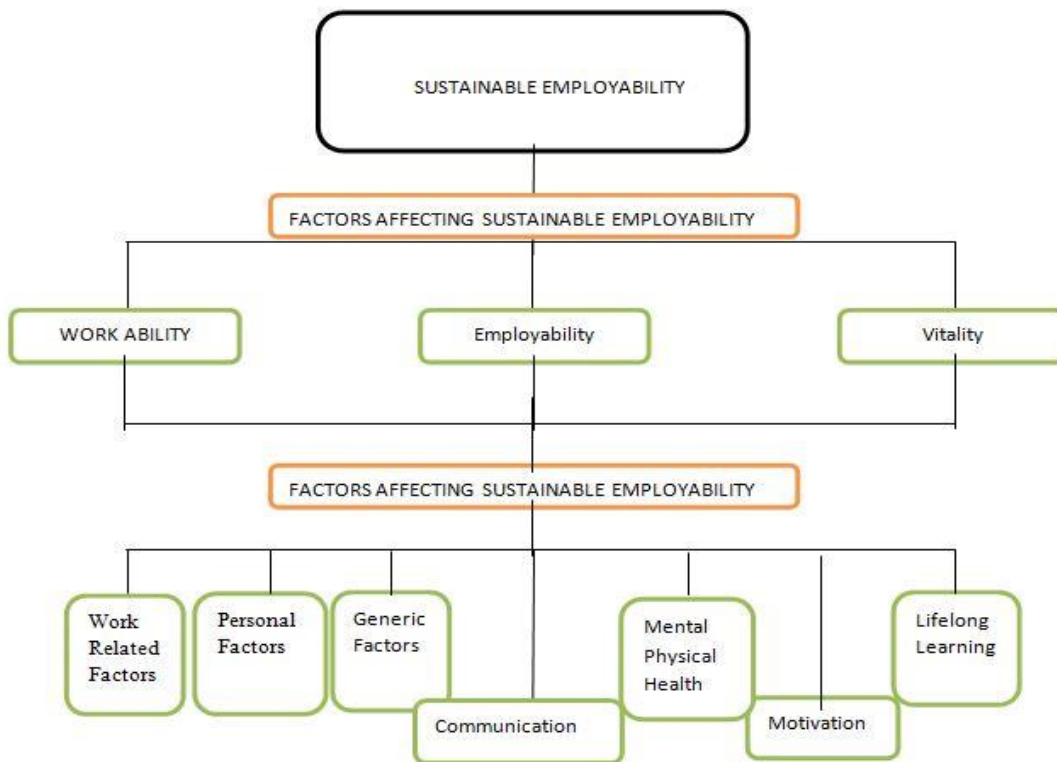
## PSYCHOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

The psychological perspective of the employee and the student is their self perception of the term employability; the individual perception is based upon the individual capacity to attain and maintain the opportunities and create them for themselves [22]. Contrasting to which, few other authors identified the relation between perceived possibilities of employment and obtaining new employment [23], According to the psychological perspective, the following are the observation from different authors.

1. Self perspective depends largely upon different perceptions basis their experience and their professional profiles. The motivation for employment also impacts their perception towards employability [53].
2. The perception is the possibilities of employment which depends upon the personal, organizational (Job level) and social factors (the job availability) [48].

## IV. PROPOSED WORK- SUSTAINABLE EMPLOYABILITY MODEL

On the basis of literature review, the following model has been proposed.



### Model 1: Sustainable Employability Model

#### FACTOR1 WORK RELATED FACTORS

These factors include, Anticipation and optimization, Balance, Career adaptability, Career Identity, Conducive work environment, Corporate sense, Domain specific training, Employability, Employee performance, Freedom at work, Improved working conditions, Involvement in work, Job satisfaction, Job security, Occupational expertise, Productivity, Retirement benefits, Work engagement, Work environment, Work ethics, Work experience [26].

These factors are considered imperative to achieve employability, vitality, work ability and sustainability, however, it has been considered as the human resource department's concern to provide conducive work environment to the employees, help employee anticipate and optimize the working schedule which would further help them enhance their productivity [59]. According to the researches, an employee must have a corporate sense while being on job, a number of theorist believe and work engagement as other factors significant for vitality [1]. Work environment considers the work place where employees spend most of their time and energy, many researchers, therefore have recognized the importance and proved that there is a direct impact of the workplace environment on employee motivation, employee behavior, their overall development and the performance [44]. However, despite the several studies conducted, the literature review proposes that in a number of organizations employees still experience poor work environment, [52] such as discrimination, social discouragement, stress and pressure at work, and interpersonal work stressors, [81]. Such factors affect the employee work ability and the negatively affect their capacity to perform their tasks [16].

#### FACTOR 2 PERSONAL ATTRIBUTES

Based on the literature review, following factors are being identified as Personal attributes, alertness and concentration, financial circumstances, Personal identity, Quality sleep, Self identity, Team work, Time management, Vitality.

Amongst these factors, vitality represents the feeling of being alert and active [46]. A vital person is someone who is active with high spirits having infectious mental and physical energy which enhances their productivity [41].

#### FACTOR 3 GENERIC SKILLS

Generic skills are the soft skills such as leadership, mentorship, problem solving and quality interpersonal relations [71]. These skills are transferable and are essential for employment [66]. Similarly, the energizing and positive work environment depends upon the healthy relationship between the employees [77]. Contradictory to which, organizations keep relationships in background giving them the least importance [73]. Another important generic skill is to measure the positivity to negativity ratio at the workplace. If the ratio is low it implies the restrictive emotional space. On the other hand if the ratio is high it signifies expansive emotional space at the workplace [34]. This ratio is important to increase the capacity to gain extraordinary results [27]. Employees who work in such environment are motivated and help develop positivity; this increases team work, productivity and high performance [45].

#### FACTOR 4 COMMUNICATION

A number of authors at different time periods have researched and concluded that communication is an interpersonal skill that is necessary for the global business



world [23]. It is an assumption that communication is fundamental and a skill which is possessed by people at large, however, contrary to which interpersonal skills are the most needed and less observed amongst the students and professionals. In the recent years, the lack of communication skill has been seen as a cause to many industrial issues and disasters [47].

#### FACTOR 5 MOTIVATION

To create a thriving workforce it is important to motivate them, motivate also helps boost productivity. A motivated workforce helps eliminate depression, stress and physical and mental illness [65]. This also promotes performance, job satisfaction and overall organizational outcome and employee commitment towards the organization [64]. It has

#### FACTOR 7 LIFELONG LEARNING

Lifelong learning is an approach to gain knowledge for personal and professional reasons; learning enhances social inclusion, personal development, self sustainability and employability [29]. Lifelong learning is an exercise for personality development to achieve financial security and safe future [67]. Education and learning through multiple, formal and in formal forums helps in conception and adaptation of knowledge and skills which further helps in achieving sustainable development and lifelong professional and personal growth [88]. Other authors have also identified the importance and learning and education throughout the life and proved the importance of learning for sustainability [4]. Sustainable development is not only the result of education and continuous learning; rather it is based on the relationship between the three dimensions of human behavior, the cognitive development, intrinsic and extrinsic motivation and ethical dimension [42].

### V. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

With the focus on sustainable employability and its factors, the literature review helps in building a detailed structure of the factors that help achieve sustainable employability. The paper further identifies the top 3 factors affecting SE, including, work related factors, communication and generic skills, therefore, it can be concluded, that in order to gain job a graduate must focus on improving their communication and generic skills. However, the improvement in work related factors is the responsibility of the company itself. The review also investigated that Vitality is another factor considered imperative in achieving sustainability, in order to achieve vitality; the top 3 factors include, and work related factors, communication and mental and physical health. Therefore, it can be concluded, that in order to stay active and energetic at work, the students and the professionals also require working on the continuous improvement in their mental and physical health. The third necessary factor identified is the work ability. For a professional to be able to work physically, mentally and socially, they are required to be strong in personal attributes, such as staying alert and active, be satisfied with the financial circumstances, take a good quality sleep, be able to manage time, and maintain a personal identity. Other important skills include lifelong sustained learning and motivation. The paper also developed a model for sustainable employability based on the literature review which demonstrates a relationship

been observed that motivated employees show less absenteeism and burnout [30]. This is due to the fact that employees are more energetic and physically and mentally healthy [37].

#### FACTOR 6 MENTAL AND PHYSICAL HEALTH

Mental and Physical health has been considered as a strategic asset by the health management companies which facilitate target achievements in the business. The other authors also support the healthy workplace route to gain business excellence [99]. According to the research, the primary source for the creativity is considered as the positive mental health [85]. Similarly, the mental issues are associated with the productivity loss due to the absence and sickness [24].

between all the identified factors in the study. The 7 major factors affect the employee vitality; work ability and employability which further help achieve the sustainable employability.

### VI. SCOPE FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

The 7 factors identified from the literature review, the work related factors, the personal attributes, Generic skills, communication, motivation, mental and physical health and lifelong learning can be studied empirically in order to find out the degree of impact they pose on sustainable employability. The research can be conducted in specific domains empirically testing the impact of mental and physical health on employee sustainability, the impact of Employability skills and work related factors on the sustainability of the management or the employers, and the impact of Qualifications, job related skills and competency on teaching professionals. The model introduced can also be studied in further researches.

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# APPENDIX 1 DISTRIBUTION OF REVIEWED ARTICLES IN THE CORRESPONDING JOURNALS

## JOURNALS REFERRED



**APPENDIX 2** THE TABLE CLASSIFIES THE INDUSTRIES IN WHICH THE STUDIES HAVE BEEN CONDUCTED SO FAR

