



Employees' perceptions of subjective career success, core self-evaluation and career adaptability



Authors:

Belinda Janeke¹ 
 Marthinus Delpoort² 

Affiliations:

¹Department of Career Services, Division of Student Affairs, University of the Free State, Bloemfontein, South Africa

²Department of Industrial Psychology, Faculty of Economic and Management Sciences, University of the Free State, Qwaqwa, South Africa

Corresponding author:

Belinda Janeke,
 janekeb@ufs.ac.za

Dates:

Received: 11 July 2025
 Accepted: 01 Oct. 2025
 Published: 12 Jan. 2026

How to cite this article:

Janeke, B., & Delpoort, M. (2026). Employees' perceptions of subjective career success, core self-evaluation and career adaptability. *African Journal of Career Development*, 8(1), a182. <https://doi.org/10.4102/ajcd.v8i1.182>

Copyright:

© 2026. The Authors.
 Licensee: AOSIS. This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International (CC BY 4.0) license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>)

Read online:



Scan this QR code with your smart phone or mobile device to read online.

Background: The ability to adjust to career transitions is becoming increasingly important because of rapid technological developments, which alter labour markets and workplace demands.

Objectives: Within the framework of the career construction model of adaptation, we examined the relationships among core self-evaluation (adaptivity readiness), career adaptability (adaptability resources), and subjective career success (adaptation result).

Methods: For this purpose, we used structural equation modelling (SEM), a cross-sectional design and sampled 242 employees from a higher education institution in South Africa.

Results: The results showed that core self-evaluation is a powerful and reliable predictor of subjective job success across the eight categories. The growth and development subdimension was significantly impacted by career adaptability, but the impact on subjective career success was lower than expected.

Conclusion: We found that psychological resources, especially core self-evaluation qualities such as emotional stability, self-efficacy and self-esteem, influence employees' views of purposeful and a happy workplace. We recommend that adaptive readiness be developed through person-centred interventions or psychological therapies for boosting resilience and job satisfaction. By shifting the focus to internal psychological resources influencing career outcomes, especially in the context of higher education in South Africa, the study makes a theoretical and a practical contribution to career development literature. Recommendations for future research include exploring behavioural responses and longitudinal dynamics of career adaptation.

Contribution: This study extends the career construction model by empirically validating the mediating role of career adaptability between core self-evaluation and subjective career success. It contributes to the understanding of how internal psychological resources shape adaptive career outcomes in higher education, offering evidence-based guidance for employee development and organisational career interventions.

Keywords: career development; career adaptivity; career adaptability; career success; higher education; core self-evaluation; subjective career success; South Africa.

Introduction

Background

Globally, labour markets are significantly transformed by globalisation, economic instability, technological advancement and shifting demographic trends (International Labour Organisation, 2023; World Economic Forum, 2023). In the process, countries are grappling across all income levels with persistent unemployment, escalating mismatches of skills and pressure to transition to knowledge-based economies (International Labour Organisation, 2023). In Africa, these global dynamics are compounded by challenges such as limited access to quality education and training, underemployment and slow industrial growth (African Development Bank, 2023; United Nations Economic Commission for Africa, 2023). In response, the African Development Bank's Ten-Year Strategy (2024–2033) highlights the need to prioritise industrialisation, education and regional integration to stimulate inclusive economic growth and job creation across the continent (African Development Bank Group, 2024). Currently, rapid digitalisation and automation redefine the nature of work, placing increased pressure on both education systems and workforce development strategies to equip individuals with the skills and adaptability needed to thrive in a constantly evolving world of work (World Bank, 2024; World Economic Forum, 2023).

The World Economic Forum (2025) projects that 78 million new jobs could be created by 2030, which requires urgent upskilling efforts to match the changing demands of global economics. In South Africa, skills development, adaptability and inclusive employment strategies are particularly urgent because of unemployment, skills shortages and wage stagnation (Statistics South Africa, 2025; World Bank, 2025). In this context, the negative impact of rising inflation, fluctuating global trade markets, automation technologies and artificial intelligence (AI) cannot be ignored. According to the World Economic Forum (Di Battista et al., 2023), AI will impact over 60% of jobs globally within the next decade; thus, reskilling is important to adapt to the changing workplace. Furthermore, the high youth unemployment rate (45.5% in 2024) underscores a need for interventions that foster career adaptability, digital literacy and lifelong learning (Statistics South Africa, 2024).

However, while much of the existing literature focuses on enhancing adaptability resources such as skills and coping strategies, the outcomes of adaptation, like subjective career success, remain underexplored. Subjective career success is a critical adaptation result because it captures employees' personal sense of fulfilment, alignment with values and perceived growth rather than relying solely on objective metrics such as income or job title (Heslin, 2005). Few empirical studies have examined how psychological dispositions (e.g. core self-evaluation) and adaptability resources jointly predict subjective career success in dynamic work environments. Addressing this gap is crucial for designing interventions that not only develop employees' adaptability but also enhance their career satisfaction and engagement.

These challenges persist alongside a rapidly evolving higher education sector (International Labour Organisation, 2023; Universities South Africa, 2024), which demands digital and structural transformation, while shifting work models and global workforce trends shape career trajectories (eCampus News, 2025; Mlambo & Mpanza, 2024). In this context, employees must demonstrate career adaptation competencies and behaviours to navigate complex and evolving work environments. Instead of being reactive to external demands, career adaptation requires a dynamic process involving individual resources and contextual factors (Rudolph et al., 2017; Savickas, 2020), which positions adaptation as an ongoing process of aligning personal goals with environmental opportunities and constraints (Duarte et al., 2017; Lee et al., 2021). Therefore, we drew on Janeke's (2023) refined version of the career construction model of adaptation (Rudolph et al., 2017), which includes personal dispositions, career adaptability resources, adaptive responses and subjective career success as outcomes of the adaptation process.

This study focuses on employees at a South African higher education institution because this sector is at the forefront of navigating digital transformation, funding constraints and evolving workforce expectations (Mlambo & Mpanza, 2024; Universities South Africa, 2024). Higher education

institutions play a dual role in preparing graduates for the labour market while simultaneously managing the career development of their own diverse staff, who face similar challenges of job security, skills renewal and professional growth. Understanding how core self-evaluation and career adaptability influence subjective career success within this context provides actionable insights for organisational policies that foster staff retention, engagement and well-being. Therefore, this population offers a unique and relevant lens for examining the full adaptation process.

Previous research conducted in South Africa and other African contexts has emphasised the role of career adaptability resources, but a limited focus was placed on the outcomes of adaptation, particularly subjective career success. There is a growing need to explore the entire adaptation process, rather than isolating individual resources or traits (Diale & Van Zyl, 2021; Mashaba & Themane, 2022). Therefore, it is important to empirically test the relationship between core self-evaluation, career adaptability and subjective career success. This research was conducted within the framework of an adapted version of the career construction model of adaptation.

Theoretical framework

This study is grounded in Career Construction Theory (CCT), which views career development as a dynamic process shaped by how individuals construct meaning from their vocational experiences (Savickas, 2020). Central to this theory is the career construction model of adaptation, which outlines a process through which individuals adapt to changing career environments (Rudolph et al., 2017). Career adaptability is a fundamental construct in career construction theory, which suggests that individuals differ in their willingness and ability to develop career-related beliefs to engage in positive career-related behaviours that can lead to positive career responses and results (Savickas & Porfeli, 2012). Adaptation behaviours enable individuals to respond effectively to environmental changes, which promotes successful adaptation, experienced as career success (Rudolph et al., 2017; Savickas, 2020; Savickas & Porfeli, 2012).

The career construction model of adaptation (Figure 1) progresses from individual adaptive readiness (personal traits and dispositions), through the development of adaptability resources, leading to adapting responses (behaviours), and culminating in adaptation results such as career success or satisfaction (Rudolph et al., 2017).

Using this model as the theoretical framework allowed us to explore the interrelationships between core self-evaluation, career adaptability and subjective career success. In this model, core self-evaluation is positioned as a measure of adaptive readiness and serves as a key predictor of both career adaptability and subjective career success, while career adaptability is conceptualised as the individual's adaptability resources, enabling flexible, forward-thinking responses to

professional transitions and uncertainty. Thus, career adaptability functions as both an outcome of core self-evaluation and a predictor of subjective career success (Janeke, 2023). Subjective career success reflects the adaptation result, referring to an individual's personal experience of fulfilment, satisfaction and meaning in their career progression. According to Janeke (2023), the adapted model assumes that employees' capacity for core self-evaluation and career adaptability influence subjective perceptions of career success.

Subjective career success is considered to be an adaptation result that refers to an individual's internal sense of achievement and satisfaction in their career (Heslin, 2005). Unlike objective indicators such as income or job title, subjective career success emphasises meaningful progression, personal fulfilment and alignment with individual values. For employees in academia and support services, subjective career success is often shaped by developmental opportunities, autonomy, work-life balance and recognition, influenced by personal agency and adaptability. The rapidly shifting labour market requires employees to demonstrate both career adaptability and core self-evaluation to achieve subjective career success, which reflects personal perceptions of career satisfaction, fulfilment and meaningful progression (Heslin, 2005). Given these dynamics, we examined whether core self-evaluation and career adaptability predict subjective career success as suggested by the career construction model of adaptation.

Career adaptability refers to an individual's capacity to proactively manage a career by drawing upon adaptability resources and employing adapting responses to achieve positive adaptation results (Rudolph et al., 2017). It develops along four dimensions, namely concern, control, curiosity and confidence, which collectively empower an individual to plan for the future, take ownership of own development, explore opportunities and remain resilient in the face of uncertainty (Savickas, 2020). It is assumed that individuals with higher levels of career adaptability are more likely to engage in meaningful career planning, respond constructively to change and align personal goals with evolving labour market demands. In today's rapidly shifting work landscape, those who develop stronger adaptability resources might be

better positioned to sustain employability, experience greater job satisfaction and achieve long-term career success (Di Battista et al., 2023).

Core self-evaluation, a form of adaptive readiness, encompasses self-esteem, self-efficacy, emotional stability and locus of control, which shapes how challenges and opportunities in professional growth are perceived (Bono & Judge, 2003; Chang et al., 2012). Employees with positive core self-evaluations are more likely to engage proactively in career planning, persist in the face of setbacks and leverage development opportunities (Ng et al., 2021). Individuals with high core self-evaluation attain more complex jobs and adapt better to change, leading to higher job satisfaction, reduced stress and burnout and greater career success (Judge, 2009), while those with a negative core self-evaluation exhibit low life satisfaction and believe that their inabilities lead to failure and hinder the fulfilment of expectations (Özer et al., 2016).

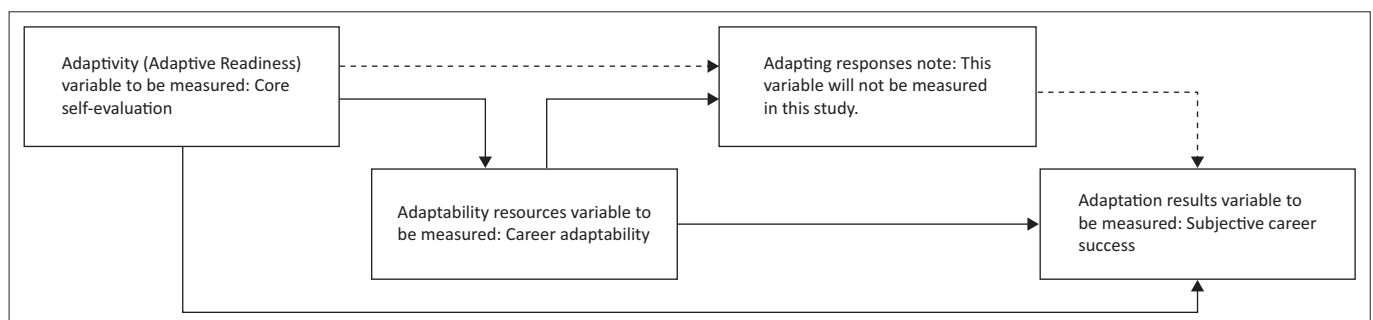
Both core self-evaluation and career adaptability drive the ability to navigate changes; therefore, we assumed that both may have an effect on subjective career success, a measure of personal fulfilment in careers.

The model provided a meaningful lens to understand how personal dispositions, career adaptability and career-related outcomes interact within the career development process. It is also useful to offer practical recommendations for career development interventions in a South African higher education context, as improvement of core self-evaluation might foster subjective career success and retention.

Methodology

The purpose was to investigate the relationship between core self-evaluations, career adaptability and subjective career success to recommend strategies for career development. These variables represent core pillars of a broader adaptation process as conceptualised by Rudolph et al. (2017) in the career construction model of adaptation. Three hypotheses were formulated:

- H_{1a}**: Core self-evaluations (representing adaptive readiness) have a significant positive effect on career adaptability (representing adaptive resources).



Source: Adapted from Janeke, B. (2023). A psychological perspective on career adaptation among university students. Master's thesis. University of South Africa; and Rudolph, C.W., Lavigne, K.N., & Zacher, H. (2017). Career adaptability: A meta-analysis of relationships with measures of adaptivity, adapting responses and adaptation results. *Journal of Vocational Behaviour*, 98, 17–34. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jvb.2016.09.002>

FIGURE 1: Conceptual framework of the career construction model of adaptation.

H₂₂: Core self-evaluations (representing adaptive readiness) have a significant positive effect on subjective career success (representing adaptation results).

H₂₃: Career adaptability (representing adaptive resources) has a significant positive effect on subjective career success (representing adaptation results).

Research design

We have employed a cross-sectional explanatory design from a positivistic paradigm. This design was chosen because it allows for the simultaneous estimation of multiple structural relationships using structural equation modelling (SEM), making it efficient for examining complex theoretical models in a single phase of data collection. Longitudinal or experimental designs, while valuable for establishing causal ordering, were not feasible because of resource and time constraints, as well as the practical challenges of tracking the same employees over multiple time points within a changing organisational environment. This type of design is limited by the extent to which it can prove causality; therefore, the causal ordering of variables was guided by two theories, namely career construction theory (Savickas, 2020) and the model of adaptation (Rudolph et al., 2017).

Population and sampling

The population consisted of staff and contractors employed for 12 months or more at a South African higher-education institution. Because of the size of the population, we employed non-probability convenience sampling to select a group of participants ($n = 242$). Most of the participants were in middle adulthood (Table 1).

We conducted SEM, a statistical approach for analysing large samples, to test the proposed structural model and the hypothesised structural pathways. Accordingly, a power analysis (Wang & Rhemtulla, 2021) was conducted to confirm that the sample size was adequate to reliably reject the null hypotheses. As the requisite sample size in SEM varies depending on the implementation of item parcelling, we evaluated two distinct models, namely: (1) a holistic model wherein each latent variable was operationalised using three-item parcels and (2) a detailed model wherein the subdimensions of the subjective career success subscales were represented by individual items. Power analyses, configured with a power level of 0.8, a significance level of 0.05 and an anticipated effect size of 0.15, indicated a requisite sample size of $n = 213$. Therefore, our sample ($n = 242$) was deemed appropriate to reliably test the proposed hypotheses.

TABLE 1: Age distribution.

Age range (years)	Frequency	%
18–24	11	4.5
25–34	64	26.4
35–44	74	30.6
45–54	60	24.8
55–64	27	11.2
> 65	6	2.5

The data collection instrument

Three previously validated scales, namely the Subjective Career Success Inventory (SCSI), the Career Adapt-Abilities Scale (CAAS) and the Core Self-Evaluation Scale (CSES), were used to operationalise the variables under investigation. The scales were combined into a single survey and distributed to the target population using an online survey platform (EvaSys).

The SCSI measures eight dimensions underlying an employee's perceived career success, namely authenticity, growth and development, influence, meaningful work, personal life, quality work, recognition and satisfaction (Shockley et al., 2016). Each factor is measured by three items presented with the stem 'considering my career as a whole...' and are measured on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 'strongly disagree' to 'strongly agree'. The internal consistency for the scale ($\alpha = 0.83$) was satisfactory, with support for the eight-factor structure of the model (comparative fit index [CFI] = 0.98; root mean square error of approximation [RMSEA] = 0.05) (Ibrahim & Amari, 2018). This scale was selected as the changing workplace necessitates a shift from objective to subjective factors when investigating employees' views of their career success.

Career Adapt-Abilities Scale, developed by Savickas and Porfeli (2012), was used to measure career adaptability. The CAAS consists of four subscales, each with six items measuring concern, control, curiosity and confidence as psychosocial resources for managing career transitions and developmental tasks (Savickas & Porfeli, 2012). This scale was originally conceptualised as a multidimensional construct (RMSEA = 0.52; standardised root mean square residual [SRMR] = 0.40), but subsequent research has demonstrated strong support for a second-order (general) factor (Khampirat, 2024).

The Core Self-Evaluation Scale, developed by Judge et al. (2003), measures core self-evaluation. This 12-item scale consists of six positively worded items and six negatively worded items, which are rated using a five-point Likert scale. Positive wording examples include 'I am confident I get the success I deserve', while negative wording includes 'I am filled with doubts about my competence'. This scale was selected as it demonstrated adequate internal consistency ($\alpha = 0.80$) and strong construct validity (CFI = 0.93; RMSEA = 0.063; SRMR = 0.68) in various studies (Gu et al., 2015; Özer et al., 2016).

Ethical considerations

Ethical approval to conduct this study was obtained from the University of the Free State General/Human Research Ethics Committee (GHREC) of the institution, approval number: UFS-HSD2022/1620/22/23. The Human Resource (HR) Department played a pivotal role in upholding data protection standards during the research process. To solicit voluntary participation, the department used the official

communication channel, namely email, to distribute invitations to employees. We did not have direct access to sensitive staff information, mitigating the risk of violating the provisions outlined in the *POPI Act*. Participation was voluntary, and the respondents could withdraw from the study at any time without any repercussions, as suggested by Sarantakos (2013). The participants were informed about the background and purpose of the study, and written informed consent was obtained before data were collected. No identifiable data were recorded to protect the identity of the participants.

Statistical analysis techniques

The data were analysed in JAMOVI (Love et al., 2025), an open-source statistical analysis software package capable of advanced SEM. Cronbach's alpha (α) was calculated to measure the internal consistency of the scales (Cronbach, 1951). Cronbach's alpha assumes tau equivalence and unidimensionality, which are often violated during data analysis. Therefore, McDonald's coefficient omega (ω) was also calculated because of less stringent assumptions surrounding factor structure and homogeneity (Enders, 2022). Both indices were used to determine whether the latent variables were successfully operationalised.

Convergent validity was assessed by computing the average variance extracted (AVE), which quantifies the mean proportion of variance explained (i.e. communality) across the items or item parcels of a given construct. As Hair et al. (2020) recommend, values exceeding 0.5 were acceptable. Discriminant validity was evaluated using the heterotrait-monotrait (HTMT) ratio of correlations. Although developed for variance-based SEM (Henseler et al., 2015), the HTMT metric has been adapted for covariance-based approaches (Afthanorhan et al., 2021). A threshold value of less than 0.85 is widely accepted as an indication of adequate discriminant validity (Hair et al., 2020).

Structural equation modelling, a second-generation multivariate analysis technique, was used to test the proposed model and the subsequent structural relationships between the variables (Hoyle, 2023). Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) with robust maximum likelihood (RML) was used as the preferred estimation technique because multivariate normality assumptions were violated (Wulandari et al., 2021). Fit statistics were evaluated in relation to sample size and model complexity, as recommended by Kline (2023). The following indices were considered indicative of acceptable model fit: RMSEA, if < 0.08 ; CFI, if > 0.95 ; and Tucker-Lewis Index (TLI), if > 0.95 . Less emphasis was placed on the SRMR, as it is often biased upwards for models with less than 12 observed variables (Hair et al., 2020).

Results

The data were screened for possible response bias, while missing data points (2.98%) were imputed using the nearest-neighbour (NN-1) technique (Santos et al., 2020). Negatively

worded items from the core self-evaluation scale were reverse-coded. As multivariate normality assumptions were violated (Wulandari et al., 2021), RML was preferred as the estimation technique. Domain-representative item parcelling (Little et al., 2013) was used with three item parcels for each latent construct to ensure that a more parsimonious model could be tested.

The reliability indices of the latent variables, as represented by their item parcels in Table 2, suggest that the variables under investigation were successfully operationalised.

The Cronbach's alpha coefficients yielded satisfactory values, indicating strong internal consistency among the item parcels (Table 2). McDonald's omega was also satisfactory. The AVE surpassed the recommended cutoff value of 0.5 (Hair et al., 2020), demonstrating adequate convergent validity and suggesting that the latent constructs effectively explained a substantial discriminant validity was assessed by calculating the HTMT ratio of correlations (Afthanorhan et al., 2021). All monotrait correlations were significantly stronger than their heterotrait counterparts, while none of the heterotrait correlations exceeded the critical cutoff value of 0.85. These results suggested that all three constructs under investigation were conceptually distinct and suitable for further structural analyses. Thus, all constructs were successfully operationalised, and the latent variables were adequately reflected by their observed variables. We then tested the structural model and the implied relationships among the variables. The various goodness-of-fit indices for the proposed structural model were all satisfactory (Table 3).

The Satorra-Bentler scaled chi-square ($S-B\chi^2$) was statistically significant, although this index is often sensitive to sample size (Hair et al., 2020). The RMSEA (< 0.08) indicated an acceptable fit, suggesting that the reproduced covariance matrix closely matched the observed covariance matrix. Similarly, the SRMR of 0.039 supported a good model fit, falling below the 0.08 threshold. As the SRMR tends to be biased upwards for models with fewer than twelve indicator variables, more emphasis was placed on the other fit indices. Both incremental fit indices (CFI and TLI) indicated good model fit; therefore, the proposed model was a permissible representation of the underlying relationships among the latent variables, and the regression coefficients between the latent variables could be interpreted (Table 4).

The regression coefficients for the proposed structural pathways revealed that core self-evaluations had a statistically significant, strong positive effect ($\gamma = 0.603$) on subjective career success and subsequently, *Hypothesis 1*

TABLE 2: Reliability indices of the latent variables.

Variable	α	ω	AVE
Core self-evaluations	0.82	0.83	0.63
Career adaptability	0.96	0.96	0.90
Subjective career success	0.95	0.95	0.86

α , Cronbach's alpha; ω , McDonald's Omega; AVE, average variance extracted.

was supported. The results further revealed that core self-evaluations also had a significant, moderately strong positive effect on career adaptability ($\gamma = 0.407$), providing support for *Hypothesis 2*. Lastly, career adaptability had a relatively weak, yet statistically significant, positive effect ($\beta = 0.215$) on subjective career success, which supports *Hypothesis 3*. However, because of the weaker-than-expected effect size, further investigation into the subdimensions of subjective career success was conducted. The regression coefficients of the subdimensions of subjective career success revealed that core self-evaluation remains a strong driver of all the sub-facets of subjective career success (Table 5).

However, career adaptability's influence was limited to the growth and development subdimension ($\beta = 0.347, p < 0.001$), with no significant effects on any of the other subdimensions. Therefore, although support for *Hypothesis 3* was obtained, career adaptability had a much weaker and limited impact on subjective career success than originally anticipated.

These findings challenge traditional prioritisation of adaptability resources in career development. It reinforces and extends the career construction model of adaptation (Rudolph et al., 2017) as it shows that core self-evaluation, a marker of adaptive readiness, plays a more pivotal role in predicting subjective career success than career adaptability, which represents adaptability resources. These findings support previous research, which emphasised the fundamental role of the self-concept in professional experiences (Di Fabio & Palazzeschi, 2020; Kernis, 2003). Thus, employees with high core self-evaluation tend to make career choices that align with their values, pursue continuous skill development and exert influence in their professional spheres, as Janeke (2023) and Khan et al. (2022) also found. It can be deduced that confidence fosters job satisfaction and enhances the ability to attain workplace recognition, supporting Akkaya et al. (2022) and Hussain et al. (2019) findings. As Judge et al. (2005) also deduced, the positive impact of core self-evaluation on work-life integration suggests that self-assured individuals manage stress more effectively and achieve a higher sense of overall fulfilment as they proactively seek balance, set clear professional and personal boundaries, and engage in adaptive coping strategies that enhance their well-being.

The significant relationship between career adaptability and one of the sub-dimensions of subjective career success, namely, the growth and development, aligns with the career construction model, which posits that adaptability is particularly relevant to continuous learning and career progression (Savickas & Porfeli, 2012). However, it does not automatically translate into perceptions of career achievement or recognition, which aligns with the findings of Savickas (2020) and Bocciardi et al. (2017), who emphasised adaptability as a critical, supporting resource in the broader adaptation process. The ability to adapt to new challenges, acquire new skills and embrace change is central to career growth.

We also found that core self-evaluation and career adaptability are interrelated but distinct constructs of subjective career success. The positive relationship between core self-evaluation and career adaptability indicates that individuals with higher core self-evaluation tend to be more adaptable in navigating career transitions, which aligns with Hirschi and Valero's (2015) and Rudolph et al.'s (2017) findings that adaptivity (core self-evaluation) is a precursor to adaptability (career adaptability), facilitating better career decision-making and self-efficacy. Recent studies indicate that career adaptive attributes, such as psychological capital and resilience, interact mutually to enhance career success (Coetzee & Mbiko, 2023).

While previous models (Rudolph et al., 2017; Savickas, 2020) conceptualised both adaptive readiness and adaptability as key precursors to career success, we found a stronger emphasis on the former. Specifically, core self-evaluation significantly predicted all eight subdimensions of subjective career success, whereas career adaptability showed a significant, albeit moderate, effect on one of the subdimensions, namely growth and development. Therefore, assumptions that adaptability resources are equally predictive of adaptation results are challenged, while Haenggli and Hirschi's (2020) findings that individual traits such as self-belief and efficacy shape perceptions of success more robustly than skills-based adaptability are supported. The findings also support Bocciardi et al.'s (2017) and Zacher's (2014) findings that the effect of career adaptability is contingent upon internal predispositions and context, rather than being universally impactful across domains of career success.

TABLE 3: Fit statistics for the proposed structural model.

RMSEA	95% Confidence		RMSEA p -value	SRMR	CFI	TLI	S-B χ^2		
	Lower	Upper					χ^2	df	p -value
0.07	0.04	0.09	0.11	0.04	0.98	0.97	50.3	24	0.001

S-B χ^2 , Satorra–Bentler scaled chi-square; RMSEA, root mean square error of approximation; SRMR, standardised root mean square residual; CFI, comparative fit index; TLI, Tucker–Lewis index.

TABLE 4: Regression coefficients for the structural model.

Dependent	Predictor	Estimate	SE	95% CI		β/γ	z	p -value
				Lower	Upper			
SCS	CSE	0.51	0.07	0.38	0.64	0.60	7.64	< 0.001
CA	CSE	3.43	0.63	2.18	4.67	0.41	5.40	< 0.001
CSE	CA	0.02	0.01	0.01	0.04	0.21	2.94	0.003

CSE, core self-evaluations; CA, career adaptability; SCS, subjective career success; SE, standard error; β/γ , completely standardised regression coefficient.

TABLE 5: Regression coefficients for the subjective career success subscales.

Dependent	Predictor	Estimate	SE	95% CI		β/γ	z	p-value
				Lower	Upper			
REC	CSE	0.76	0.16	0.44	1.08	0.58	4.66	< 0.001
REC	CA	-0.01	0.01	-0.04	0.01	-0.08	-0.82	0.412
QWORK	CSE	0.52	0.17	0.18	0.85	0.45	3.06	0.002
QWORK	CA	0.02	0.01	-0.00	0.05	0.17	1.56	0.118
MEAN	CSE	0.51	0.16	0.18	0.83	0.45	3.08	0.002
MEAN	CA	0.02	0.01	-0.00	0.04	0.18	1.81	0.071
INFL	CSE	0.83	0.18	0.48	1.18	0.67	4.71	< 0.001
INFL	CA	-0.01	0.01	-0.03	0.02	-0.0	-0.59	0.554
AUT	CSE	0.96	0.14	0.69	1.23	0.76	6.92	< 0.001
AUT	CA	0.01	0.01	-0.01	0.03	0.05	0.64	0.525
PLIFE	CSE	0.86	0.16	0.54	1.18	0.49	5.30	< 0.001
PLIFE	CA	-0.02	0.01	-0.05	0.01	-0.09	-1.19	0.235
GROWTH	CSE	0.29	0.08	0.12	0.45	0.35	3.44	< 0.001
GROWTH	CA	0.03	0.01	0.01	0.05	0.35	3.32	< 0.001
SAT	CSE	1.13	0.16	0.82	1.44	0.69	7.20	< 0.001
SAT	CA	0.01	0.01	-0.02	0.04	0.04	0.51	0.611
CA	CSE	4.19	0.80	2.62	5.76	0.45	5.24	< 0.001

Source: Adapted from Janeke, B. (2023). A psychological perspective on career adaptation among university students. Master's thesis. p. 98, table 7.32, University of South Africa.

CSE, core self-evaluations; CA, career adaptability; QWORK, quality work; MEAN, meaningful work; INFL, influence; AUT, authenticity; PLIFE, personal life; GROWTH, growth; SAT, satisfaction; SE, standard error; β/γ , completely standardised regression coefficient.

Based on the findings, adaptive readiness is not merely a precursor to adaptability but a core psychological resource that facilitates subjective career success. While adaptability resources enable behavioural flexibility, it is adaptive readiness that determines the meaning and value individuals assign to their career experiences and adaptation results (Coetzee & Mbiko, 2023; Di Fabio & Palazzeschi, 2020); thus, we propose a hierarchy. Based on the insights, the theoretical contribution lies in refining the model to better understand adaptation. Adaptivity is not equal to adaptability in impact; it is the psychological foundation for adaptability. The findings carry significant practical implications for career development practice, particularly in higher education.

Practical implications

While traditional strategies have focused on enhancing adaptability through external resources, such as training, mentoring or mobility programmes, these resources have limited impact when not anchored in a strong internal self-concept. Given that core self-evaluation emerged as the strongest predictor of subjective career success, we recommend that career development programmes focus on cultivating adaptive readiness, promoting self-awareness, resilience and emotional intelligence, which are the traits underpinning adaptive behaviours and long-term success (Di Fabio & Kenny, 2019; Ng et al., 2021). Psychological interventions such as strengths-based coaching, self-reflection practices and confidence-building initiatives can help employees develop the internal mechanisms necessary for navigating complex work environments.

Organisations and career coaches should prioritise adaptivity readiness development as a foundation for adaptability. As Ibrahim and Amari (2018) suggested, subjective perceptions of success are largely influenced by internal psychological

capital rather than external achievements. Without addressing adaptivity readiness, interventions aimed at increasing adaptability are unlikely to bring meaningful change. Our findings support earlier findings that emotional self-perception and agency are prerequisites for sustained professional fulfilment (Judge, 2009; Özer et al., 2016).

By shifting the focus from skill-based interventions to person-centred psychological development, higher education can better support its workforce in achieving meaningful and satisfying careers, especially within environments undergoing rapid technological and structural transformation (Di Battista et al., 2023).

Limitations and future research

Firstly, the cross-sectional research design restricts the ability to make causal claims about the relationships between adaptive readiness, adaptability and adaptation results. Longitudinal methodologies are recommended to investigate how core self-evaluation and career adaptability evolve over time and how they jointly shape career trajectories (Wang & Rhemtulla, 2021).

Secondly, the use of a non-probability convenience sampling limits generalisability. Although the sample size was sufficient for SEM, the findings cannot be generalised to other sectors or cultural contexts. Further studies can explore diverse settings and populations to evaluate the usefulness of the model in other contexts (Diale & Van Zyl, 2021; Mashaba & Themane, 2022).

Thirdly, we did not include the adapting responses component of the adaptation model (Rudolph et al., 2017). This omission limits the ability to examine how adaptive readiness and adaptability translate into behavioural responses, such as job-seeking behaviour, decision-making

or coping actions. Future research can incorporate this element to investigate the adaptation process.

Lastly, future research can explore how adaptive readiness interacts with digital transformation, particularly as AI, automation and virtual work become more prevalent. Examining how core self-evaluation influences digital confidence, online learning engagement or career agility can provide valuable insight into 21st-century employability (Khampirat, 2024; World Economic Forum, 2025).

Conclusion

We examined the predictive roles of core self-evaluation and career adaptability in shaping subjective career success within a South African higher education context. The findings offer evidence that core self-evaluation, as a marker of adaptive readiness, serves as the strongest and most consistent predictor of subjective career success across all dimensions. Different from previous findings, career adaptability was statistically significant, but limited to the growth and development subdimension, indicating a more targeted and context-dependent effect.

The findings contribute to a deeper understanding of the career construction model of adaptation, particularly by reinforcing the primacy of adaptive readiness over adaptability resources in determining successful adaptation results. From a practical standpoint, the findings suggest that career development strategies should prioritise psychological interventions aimed at strengthening core self-evaluation, such as fostering self-efficacy, emotional stability and internal locus of control, simultaneously with efforts to develop adaptability skills. We highlight the importance of rethinking organisational approaches to career support. While adaptability remains important, its impact is contingent on individuals' internal readiness to adapt. Interventions that focus solely on external career development opportunities may fall short without a parallel emphasis on internal psychological preparedness.

Future research should address current limitations by incorporating longitudinal designs, expanding to diverse populations and sectors, and including behavioural measures such as adapting responses. Further investigation into the subcomponents of adaptive readiness and adaptability, as well as their interaction with digital transformation, could enhance our understanding of how individuals thrive in rapidly evolving work environments. Overall, this study underscores the need for holistic, person-centred career development approaches that empower employees not only with the skills but also with the self-belief to succeed in dynamic and uncertain career landscapes.

Acknowledgements

This article includes content that overlaps with research originally conducted as part of Belinda Janeke's master's thesis titled 'The effect of core self-evaluation and career

adaptability on the subjective career success of higher education employees', submitted to the Department of Industrial Psychology in the Faculty of Economic and Management Sciences, University of the Free State in 2023. The thesis was supervised by Marthinus Delpont. Portions of the data, analysis, and/or discussion have been revised, updated and adapted for journal publication. The original thesis is publicly available at: <https://scholar.ufs.ac.za/items/accb817e-e8aa-4435-93c6-397d4a5ceee2>. The authors affirm that this submission complies with ethical standards for secondary publication, and appropriate acknowledgement has been made to the original work.

Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no financial or personal relationships that may have inappropriately influenced them in writing this article.

Authors' contributions

Both authors, B.J. and M.D., contributed equally to this work.

Funding information

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial or not-for-profit sectors.

Data availability

Data sharing does not apply to this article as no new data were created or analysed in this study. The authors confirm that the data supporting the findings of this study are available within the article.

Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the authors and are the product of professional research. They do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated institution, funder, agency or that of the publisher. The authors are responsible for this article's results, findings and content.

References

- African Development Bank. (2023). *African economic outlook 2023: Mobilizing private sector financing for climate and green growth in Africa*. Retrieved from <https://www.afdb.org/en/documents/african-economic-outlook-2023>
- African Development Bank Group. (2024). *African Development Bank group unveils new ten-year strategy 2024–2033*. Retrieved from <https://www.afdb.org/en/news-and-events/press-releases/african-development-bank-group-unveils-new-ten-year-strategy-2024-2033-71299>
- Afthanorhan, A., Ghazali, P.L., & Rashid, N. (2021). Discriminant validity: A comparison of CBSEM and consistent PLS using Fornell & Larcker and HTMT approaches. *Journal of Physics: Conference Series*, 1874(1), 012085. <https://doi.org/10.1088/1742-6596/1874/1/012085>
- Akkaya, B., Panait, M., Apostu, S.A., & Kaya, Y. (2022). Agile leadership and perceived career success: The mediating role of job embeddedness. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 19(8), 4834. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph19084834>
- Bocciardi, F., Caputo, A., Fregonese, C., Langher, V., & Sartori, R. (2017). Career adaptability as a strategic competence for career development: An exploratory study of its key predictors. *European Journal of Training and Development*, 41(1), 67–82. <https://doi.org/10.1108/EJTD-07-2016-0049>

- Bono, J.E., & Judge, T.A. (2003). Core self-evaluations: A review of the trait and its role in job satisfaction and job performance. *European Journal of Personality, 17*(S1), S5–S18. <https://doi.org/10.1002/per.481>
- Chang, C.H., Ferris, D.L., Johnson, R.E., Rosen, C.C., & Tan, J.A. (2012). Core self-evaluations: A review and evaluation of the literature. *Journal of Management, 38*(1), 81–128. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0149206311419661>
- Coetzee, M., & Mbiko, M. (2023). The positive mutually reinforcing dynamics of career-adaptive attributes in career human agency. *African Journal of Career Development, 5*(1), a71. <https://doi.org/10.4102/ajcd.v5i1.71>
- Cronbach, L.J. (1951). Coefficient alpha and the internal structure of tests. *Psychometrika, 16*(3), 297–334. <https://doi.org/10.1007/BF02310555>
- Di Battista, A., Grayling, S., Hasselaar, E., Leopold, T., Li, R., Rayner, M., & Zahidi, S. (2023, November). *Future of jobs report 2023*. World Economic Forum. Retrieved from <https://www.weforum.org/reports/the-future-of-jobs-report-2023>
- Di Fabio, A., & Kenny, M.E. (2019). Resources for enhancing employee career adaptability and organizational well-being beyond personality traits: The role of emotional intelligence. *Journal of Vocational Behavior, 110*, 119–129. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jvb.2018.11.002>
- Di Fabio, A., & Palazzeschi, L. (2020). Core self-evaluation. In B.J. Carducci, C.S. Nave, A. Di Fabio, D.H. Saklofske, & C. Stough (Eds.), *The Wiley encyclopedia of personality and individual differences: Personality processes and individual differences* (pp. 83–87). Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons Ltd.
- Diale, B.M., & Van Zyl, A. (2021). Narratives of career adaptability: Voices from postgraduate students in South Africa. *African Journal of Career Development, 3*(1), 1–8. <https://doi.org/10.4102/ajcd.v3i1.36>
- Duarte, M.E., Da Silva, J.T., & Paixão, M.P. (2017). Career adaptability, employability, and career resilience in managing transitions. In K. Maree (Ed.), *Psychology of career adaptability, employability and resilience* (pp. 241–261). Springer.
- eCampus News. (2025). *32 predictions about where 2025 will take higher education*. Retrieved from <https://www.ecampusnews.com/teaching-learning/2025/01/01/2025-predictions-higher-ed/>
- Enders, C.K. (2022). *Applied missing data analysis* (2nd ed.). The Guilford Press.
- Gu, H., Wen, Z., & Fan, X. (2015). The impact of wording effect on reliability and validity of the Core Self-Evaluation Scale (CSES): A bi-factor perspective. *Personality and Individual Differences, 83*, 142–147. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.paid.2015.04.006>
- Haenggli, M., & Hirschi, A. (2020). Career adaptability and career success in the context of a broader career resources framework. *Journal of Vocational Behavior, 119*, 103414. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jvb.2020.103414>
- Hair, J.F., Howard, M.C., & Nitzl, C. (2020). Assessing measurement model quality in PLS-SEM using confirmatory composite analysis. *Journal of Business Research, 109*, 101–110. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2019.11.069>
- Henseler, J., Ringle, C.M., & Sarstedt, M. (2015). A new criterion for assessing discriminant validity in variance-based structural equation modeling. *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science, 43*(1), 115–135. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11747-014-0403-8>
- Heslin, P.A. (2005). Conceptualizing and evaluating career success. *Journal of Organizational Behavior, 26*(2), 113–136. <https://doi.org/10.1002/job.270>
- Hirschi, A., & Valero, D. (2015). Career adaptability profiles and their relationship to adaptivity and adapting. *Journal of Vocational Behavior, 88*, 220–229. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jvb.2015.03.010>
- Hoyle, R. (2023). *Handbook of structural equation modeling* (2nd ed.). Guilford Press. Retrieved from <https://www.routledge.com/Handbook-of-Structural-Equation-Modeling-Second-Edition/Hoyle/p/book/9781462544646>
- Hussain, S.D., Khaliq, A., Nisar, Q.A., Kamboh, A.Z., & Ali, S. (2019). The impact of employees' recognition, rewards and job stress on job performance: Mediating role of perceived organization support. *SEISENSE Journal of Management, 2*(2), 69–82. <https://doi.org/10.33215/sjom.v2i2.121>
- Ibrahim, M.M.S., & Amari, A.A. (2018). Influence of the psychological capital and perceived organizational support on subjective career success: The mediating role of women's career adaptability in the Saudi context. *International Journal of Business and Management, 13*(9), 189. <https://doi.org/10.5539/ijbm.v13n9p189>
- International Labour Organization. (2023). *World employment and social outlook: Trends 2023*. Retrieved from https://www.ilo.org/sites/default/files/wcmsp5/groups/public/@dgreports/@inst/documents/publication/wcms_865332.pdf
- Janeke, B. (2023). *A psychological perspective on career adaptation among university students*. Master's thesis. University of South Africa.
- Judge, T.A. (2009). Core self-evaluations and work success. *Current Directions in Psychological Science, 18*(1), 58–62. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8721.2009.01606.x>
- Judge, T.A., Bono, J.E., Erez, A., & Locke, E.A. (2005). Core self-evaluations and job and life satisfaction: The role of self-concordance and goal attainment. *Journal of Applied Psychology, 90*(2), 257. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0021-9010.90.2.257>
- Judge, T.A., Erez, A., Bono, J.E., & Thoresen, C.J. (2003). The core self-evaluations scale: Development of a measure. *Personnel Psychology, 56*(2), 303–331. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1744-6570.2003.tb00152.x>
- Kernis, M.H. (2003). Toward a conceptualization of optimal self-esteem. *Psychological Inquiry, 14*(1), 1–26. https://doi.org/10.1207/S15327965PLI1401_01
- Khampirat, B. (2024). Psychometric characteristics of the career adapt-abilities scale in Thai undergraduate students: A multiple indicators multiple causes model. *Frontiers in Psychology, 15*, 1338401. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2024.1338401>
- Khan, H.G., Azam, O., & Yaseen, S. (2022). Assessing the impact of a proactive personality on early employment status and job search behavior: The role of career planning and the moderating effect of core self-evaluation. *Lehore Journal of Business, 10*(2), 82–108. <https://doi.org/10.35536/ljb.2022.v10.i2.a3>
- Kline, R.B. (2023). *Principles and practice of structural equation modeling* (5th ed.). Guilford Press.
- Lee, P.C., Xu, S., & Yang, W. (2021). Is career adaptability a double-edged sword? The impact of work social support and career adaptability on turnover intentions during the COVID-19 pandemic. *International Journal of Hospitality Management, 94*, 102875. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijhm.2021.102875>
- Little, T.D., Rhemtulla, M., Gibson, K., & Schoemann, A.M. (2013). Why the items versus parcels controversy needn't be one. *Psychological Methods, 18*(3), 285–300. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0033266>
- Love, J., Dropman, D., & Selker, R. (2025). *The Jamovi project*. Retrieved from <https://www.jamovi.org/about.html>
- Mashaba, R.P., & Themane, M.J. (2022). Career adaptability of university students in rural South Africa: A developmental perspective. *African Journal of Career Development, 4*(1), 1–9.
- Mlambo, V., & Mpanza, S. (2024). Exploring the challenges of higher education in South Africa: A comprehensive literature review. *Alustath Journal for Human and Social Sciences, 63*(3), 22–40. <https://doi.org/10.36473/ujhss.v62i4.2261>
- Ng, T.W.H., Eby, L.T., Sorensen, K.L., & Feldman, D.C. (2021). Predictors of objective and subjective career success: A meta-analysis. *Personnel Psychology, 74*(1), 75–112. <https://doi.org/10.1111/peps.12418>
- Özer, E., Hamarta, E., Deniz, M.E., Özer, E., Hamarta, E., & Deniz, M.E. (2016). Emotional intelligence, core-self evaluation, and life satisfaction. *Psychology, 7*(2), 145–153. <https://doi.org/10.4236/psych.2016.72017>
- Rudolph, C.W., Lavigne, K.N., & Zacher, H. (2017). Career adaptability: A meta-analysis of relationships with measures of adaptivity, adapting responses, and adaptation results. *Journal of Vocational Behavior, 98*, 17–34. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jvb.2016.09.002>
- Santos, M.S., Abreu, P.H., Wilk, S., & Santos, J. (2020). How distance metrics influence missing data imputation with k-nearest neighbours. *Pattern Recognition Letters, 136*, 111–119. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.patrec.2020.05.032>
- Sarantakos, S. (2013). *Social research* (4th ed.). Red Globe Press.
- Savickas, M.L. (2020). Career construction theory and counseling model. In R.W. Lent & S.D. Brown (Eds.), *Career development and counseling: Putting theory and research to work* (3rd edn., pp. 165–199). Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons Inc.
- Savickas, M.L., & Porfeli, E.J. (2012). Career adapt-abilities scale: Construction, reliability, and measurement equivalence across 13 countries. *Journal of Vocational Behavior, 80*(3), 661673. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jvb.2012.01.011>
- Shockley, K.M., Ureksoy, H., Rodopman, O.B., Poteat, L.F., & Dullaghan, T.R. (2016). Development of a new scale to measure subjective career success: A mixed-methods study. *Journal of Organizational Behavior, 37*(1), 128–153. <https://doi.org/10.1002/job.2046>
- Statistics South Africa. (2024). *Official unemployment rate: Third quarter 2024*. Government of South Africa. Retrieved from <https://www.gov.za/news/media-statements/statistics-south-africa-official-unemployment-rate-third-quarter-2024-12-nov>
- Statistics South Africa. (2025). *The struggle for more work hours: Time-related underemployment*. Retrieved from <https://www.statssa.gov.za/?p=18028&utm>
- United Nations Economic Commission for Africa. (2023). *Economic report on Africa 2023: Building forward better toward an inclusive and resilient future*. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/10855/49992>
- Universities South Africa. (2024). *SA universities must shoulder some responsibility for funding challenges*. Retrieved from <https://usaf.ac.za/sa-universities-must-shoulder-some-responsibility-for-funding-challenges/>
- Wang, Y.A., & Rhemtulla, M. (2021). Power analysis for parameter estimation in structural equation modeling: A discussion and tutorial. *Advances in Methods and Practices in Psychological Science, 4*(1), 2515245920918253. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2515245920918253>
- World Bank. (2024). *World development report 2024: Jobs and economic transformation in a digital age*. Retrieved from <https://www.worldbank.org/en/publication/wdr2024>
- World Bank. (2025). *South Africa overview: Development news, research*. Retrieved from <https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/southafrica/overview>
- World Economic Forum. (2023). *The future of jobs report 2023*. Retrieved from <https://www.weforum.org/reports/the-future-of-jobs-report-2023>
- World Economic Forum. (2025). *Future of jobs report 2025: 78 million new job opportunities by 2030 but urgent upskilling needed to prepare workforces*. Retrieved from <https://www.weforum.org/press/2025/01/future-of-jobs-report-2025-78-million-new-job-opportunities-by-2030-but-urgent-upskilling-needed-to-prepare-workforces/>
- Wulandari, D., Sutrisno, S., & Nirwana, M.B. (2021). Mardia's skewness and kurtosis for assessing normality assumption in multivariate regression. *Enthusiastic International Journal of Applied Statistics and Data Science, 1*(1), 1–6. <https://doi.org/10.20885/enthusiastic.vol1.iss1.art1>
- Zacher, H. (2014). Individual difference predictors of change in career adaptability over time. *Journal of Vocational Behavior, 84*(2), 188–198. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jvb.2014.01.001>