The Interplay Between Servant Leadership, Skill Development, and Perceived Employability: The Role of Moderating Factors

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Abstract

The Interplay Between Servant Leadership, Skill Development, and Perceived Employability: The Role of Moderating Factors

Effective leadership is a cornerstone of successful organizations. Drawing on Conservation of Resources theory, this thesis proposes that servant leadership functions as a contextual resource that reduces the perceived costs and risks of learning, thereby enabling employees to invest in skill development, which in turn strengthens perceived employability. This research examined the effects of servant leadership on skill development and employability and tested whether three agentic characteristics (personal initiative, self-efficacy, and need for achievement) strengthen these relationships. A sample of 192 full-time employees completed an online questionnaire at two time points. Results showed that servant leadership was positively associated with skill development, and that skill development positively predicted perceived employability; moreover, skill development mediated the relationship between servant leadership and employability. Moderation tests provided limited and inconsistent support for the strengthening effects of personal initiative, self-efficacy, and need for achievement on the relationship between servant leadership and skill development, although each characteristic directly and positively related to development. The theoretical implications of this research include specifying skill development as the proximal conduit through which servant leadership relates to employability, adding temporal nuance by showing that employability judgments are most sensitive to recent, salient capability gains, and refining contingency views by positioning agentic characteristics as parallel, additive drivers rather than necessary amplifiers of leader effectiveness. For practitioners, the findings highlight the value of pairing sustained servant leadership behaviors (which include empowerment, coaching, ethical stewardship) with visible, ongoing development

opportunities (e.g., stretch assignments, mentoring, feedback cycles) that make capability gains concrete and timely, thereby translating supportive leadership into stronger employability beliefs.

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Concordia Aid to Scholarly Activity (CASA) Research Grant

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF TABLES

LIST OF FIGURES

The Interplay Between Servant Leadership, Skill Development, and Perceived Employability: The Role of Moderating Factors

INTRODUCTION

In contemporary work environments characterized by rapid technological change, shifting job demands, and increasing career uncertainty, employees' ability to continuously renew and expand their skills has become a major determinant of long-term career viability (Fugate, Kinicki, & Ashforth, 2004; Van der Heijde & Van der Heijden, 2006). As organizations navigate dynamic markets and evolving technologies, employee development is no longer optional; it is a strategic necessity for both individuals and organizations. Leadership is often expected to play a pivotal role in fostering conditions that enable learning and building capability. However, research increasingly suggests that leadership, while influential, does not automatically translate into actual skill development (DeRue & Wellman, 2009). A critical but underexplored question is why similar developmental leadership behaviors result in meaningful skill gain for some employees but not others.

Servant leadership, a leadership approach grounded in supporting follower growth, empowerment, and well-being, has been widely recognized as conducive to fostering developmental outcomes (Eva et al., 2019; Liden et al., 2008; van Dierendonck, 2011). Servant leaders create supportive and empowering environments that encourage learning, reflection, and engagement, positioning this leadership style as particularly relevant to skill acquisition. Despite this, studies examining leadership-driven development often assume that employees uniformly capitalize on the resources provided by their leaders (Maurer et al., 2003; van Dierendonck, 2015). This assumption neglects an essential reality: skill development is an active, effortful

process that depends heavily on employees' own agency, motivation, and personal resources (Noe et al., 2010; Parker et al., 2010). Thus, while leadership may provide the opportunity structure for development, it may be necessary but not sufficient for driving actual capability growth. Drawing on Conservation of Resources (COR) theory (Halbesleben et al., 2014; Hobfoll, 1989, 2001), this study conceptualizes servant leadership as an environmental resource that reduces the perceived risks associated with dedicating time, effort, and energy to learning activities. COR theory emphasizes that individuals strive to obtain, protect, and build resources. Importantly, resource gain is more likely when individuals possess adequate personal resources that allow them to invest in development. Thus, employees may differ in the extent to which they can convert leader-provided resources into skill development. Servant leadership may create favorable conditions, but the effectiveness of these conditions hinges on employees' internal resource reservoirs.

Accordingly, this study focuses on three personal resources, personal initiative, self-efficacy, and need for achievement, as key characteristics that determine whether employees are positioned to translate servant leadership into actual skill gains. These characteristics reflect distinct yet complementary aspects of employee agency. Personal initiative captures self-starting, persistent action (Frese & Fay, 2001; Frese et al., 1996); self-efficacy reflects employees' confidence in their ability to successfully engage in learning behaviors (Bandura, 1997); and need for achievement reflects the intrinsic motivation to pursue challenging goals and strive for improvement (McClelland, 1961). Rather than modeling these variables as direct predictors of skill development, this study conceptualizes them as boundary conditions that shape the effectiveness of servant leadership. In doing so, the study responds to calls for more nuanced explanations of when and for whom developmental leadership is most effective.

Skill development is positioned as a core personal resource that enhances employees' expertise, adaptability, and future career opportunities. COR theory suggests that accumulated skills expand employees' resource reservoirs and protect them from future resource loss. Skill development therefore represents a central mechanism through which servant leadership might indirectly contribute to employees' perceived employability, their belief in their ability to obtain and maintain employment opportunities (Berntson et al., 2006). From a competence-based perspective, perceived employability improves when individuals acquire and maintain skills that align with labor market demands (Van der Heijde & Van der Heijden, 2006). Skill development should therefore serve as a proximal antecedent of perceived employability.

Building on these perspectives, this study proposes a moderated mediation model in which servant leadership enhances perceived employability through its positive influence on skill development, with the strength of this indirect effect dependent on employees' levels of personal initiative, self-efficacy, and need for achievement. By integrating servant leadership, personal agency, and employability within a unified COR framework, this research makes three key contributions. First, it reframes servant leadership as an enabling condition, clarifying that its developmental effect depends on employees' internal resources. Second, it identifies specific employee characteristics that help explain variability in developmental outcomes, thereby addressing a gap in leadership and development research. Third, it positions skill development as a fundamental mechanism linking workplace context to perceived employability, advancing our understanding of how leadership behaviors translate into meaningful career perceptions. Together, these contributions highlight the interplay between leaders and employees in shaping developmental trajectories and help identify the conditions under which servant leadership is most effective in supporting employability in modern, skill-intensive work environments.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Role of a leader

Decades of research have yielded valuable insights into how leaders at various organizational levels impact crucial employee attitudes and behaviors, offering significant opportunities for learning. One of the critical attitudes that has been studied is the level of organizational commitment. Barling (2014) discusses that due to the significant trend of hiring part-time and temporary employees during the last few decades, creating and maintaining loyalty to the organization requires a high-quality leadership. In addition to commitment, employee well being and mental health is associated with positive leadership (Kozlowski, 2012). Studies show that supportive leaders affect physical and psychological well-being of their employees (Barling, 2014; Kozlowski, 2012; Montano et al., 2017; Nielsen et al., 2017). Moreover, improved performance and organizational citizenship behaviors (OCBs) are other outcomes of effective leadership (Chiniara et al., 2016; Heimann et al., 2020). In this regard, employees are more motivated to keep up their high performance standards when leaders promote self-efficacy, self-motivation, and community involvement (Shamir et al., 1993). Leaders also encourage OCB in the workplace by modeling what behavior is appropriate and this creates a corresponding pattern to exchange behaviors beyond the employee defined tasks and productivity (Smith et al., 1983). Another attitude that is related to leadership behaviors is job satisfaction (Lok et al., 2004) that has been studied to be affected by the behaviors of a leader through the mediating effect of trust (Sendjaya et al., 2010). As the competition among organizations becomes increasingly reliant on knowledge, the significance of employee development becomes crucial (Zhang et al., 2013). Leaders differentiate their relationships with followers by providing varying degrees of emotional support, decision-making responsibility, and task challenge (Liden et al., 2000). Such

behaviors pave the way for the employees to improve their abilities and assist them in achieving their goals (Liden et al., 2008). Accordingly, this study focuses on employee skill development by investigating whether servant leadership, a leadership style that emphasizes the development of subordinates, contributes to skill development and, subsequently, to employees' perceived employability. In addition, this study examines the moderating roles of three individual differences, need for achievement, personal initiative, and self-efficacy, in these relationships. The following sections review the relevant literature and present the hypotheses related to servant leadership, skill development, perceived employability, and the proposed moderators.

Servant Leadership: Definition and Distinctiveness

Servant leadership, as a leadership approach, centers on fostering the full potential of employees in the domains of task effectiveness, community stewardship, self-motivation, and their ability to lead in the future (Greenleaf, 1977). The relationship between leaders and followers plays a key role in servant leadership as it helps understanding the individual needs and the way they realize their full potential and develop self-motivation (Manz & Sims, 1987). Liden et al. (2008) validated seven dimensions for the servant leadership literature. They identify that servant leaders feel responsible to serve their members first and contribute substantially to the members growth (help subordinates grow and succeed). According to Greenleaf (1977), this is a distinguising factor between servant leaders and traditional leaders who prioritize their own interests and often exploit their subordinates for personal gain, taking advantage of their contributions and efforts to propel themselves forward. Liden et al (2008) show in their research that servant leaders demonstrate a commitment to emotional healing, fostering a supportive environment where individuals feel valued and cared for (creating value for the community), leading to the restoration and growth of well-being among their team members. They have the

essential knowledge, skills, and abilities required to address work-related challenges and solve problems effectively (conceptual skills) and empower their followers by granting them freedom, responsibility, and decision-making authority (empowering). They also engage with their followers in an open, fair, and transparent manner, demonstrating and promoting ethical behavior in their interactions.

Despite some conceptual similarities, servant leadership has been shown to be theoretically and empirically disctinct from related leadership styles. For instance, Brown & Treviño (2006) present a model for ethical leadership that entails exemplifying morally sound behavior through personal actions and interactions with others. It also involves fostering and encouraging such conduct among followers through two-way communication, reinforcement, and collaborative decision-making (Brown, et al., 2005). Although ethical behavior is a shared component between ethical leaders and servant leaders, it is not the only dimension that servant leadership relies on (Hoogh & Den Hartog, 2008).

Other research that contribute to our understanding of the distinction between servant leadership and other approaches compare this style with transformational leadership. Although a component such as emotional appeals (Bass, 1985) is common between the two styles, servant leadership "adds a moral compass" (Ehrhart, 2004, p. 69). According to Graham (1991), in the transformational leadership model, there is no explicit requirement for leaders to serve their followers solely for the benefit of the followers themselves. Instead, transformational leaders typically prioritize their commitment to the organization or, at times, their own interests, rather than emphasizing the autonomy of their followers or adhering to universal moral principles. In contrast, servant leaders desire the improvement of their subordinates for the well-being of the individuals themselves. They perceive the development of the followers as a fundamental

objective in its own right, rather than merely a tool to achieve the leader's or organization's objectives (Ehrhart, 2004).

Finally, servant leadership can be differentiated from another prominent leadership theory known as leader-member exchange (LMX) (Enhart, 2004; Liden et al., 2008). While both servant leadership and leader-member exchange theories highlight the leader's emphasis on follower development and the significance of the relationship between leaders and followers, servant leadership sets itself apart by recognizing the leader's responsibility to various organizational stakeholders beyond their immediate subordinates (Ehrhart, 2004). Moreover, the analysis of LMX has consistently focused on the interactions between two individuals (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995) which is not sufficient for a study aiming to promote engagement in community service (Liden et al., 2008). Last but not least, an essential element of servant leadership is the ethical behavior displayed by the leader, which is only marginally addressed in LMX theory (Ehrhart, 2004).

Outcomes of Servant Leadership

Research on servant leadership has been highly productive, linking the concept to various positive results and associating it with a wide array of outcomes at the individual and team levels. For instance, evidence indicates that servant leadership is positively associated with work engagement (van Dierendonck et al., 2014). In their research, van Dierendonck & Nuijten (2010) demonstrate that adopting servant leadership behavior has advantageous effects on follower engagement.

By understanding the distinctive characteristics and interests of each follower, servant leaders provide guidance and support to help these individuals reach their full potential (Lord et al., 1999). This has been shown to improve individual performance and its essential elements,

highlighting the mediating role of follower's need satisfaction in this process (Chiniara & Bentein, 2016). In addition, servant leadership, characterized by its emphasis on "people-centered" and "servant first" qualities, has the potential to lead to increased opportunities for personal career success. This is evidenced by heightened career satisfaction and enhanced individual employability (Wang et al., 2019). Drawing from Ng et al. (2005)'s idea that employees' career success not only represents their crucial contribution to organizational achievements, but indicates the effectiveness of leader behaviors, Wang et al. (2019) empirically show the positive effects of SL on career satisfaction and perceived employability. SL may also influences negatively followers turnover intention and their disengagement in a reciprocal manner as a response to the commitment displayed by their leader (Hunter, et al., 2013). Following the discussion of servant leadership, the next section focuses on the second variable in the model: employee skill development.

Skill Development

Skill development as one of the "proactive career behaviors for successful career management" (King, 2004; Taber et al., 2015) is considered necessary in this rapidly evolving era and the need for that is growing (Eby et al., 2003). More specifically, skill development is referred to as making targeted investments in the education or training that is required for future advancements (King, 2004). Previous studies show that individuals bear the primary responsibility for overseeing and shaping their own careers (Sturges et al., 2002; Vanhercke et al. , 2014). This suggests that employees must actively participate in various skill development activities to generate career opportunities that align with their career goals and secure their employability (De Vos & Soens, 2008). In this regard, studies focusing on proactive career

behaviors have primarily emphasized the impact of dispositional motivational factors, such as self-efficacy (Hirschi et al., 2013) on skill development.

Self-efficacy has been shown to not only boost perseverance but also amplify individuals' readiness to conquer challenges (Bandura, 1997), both of which are regarded as crucial factors for achieving successful proactive efforts (Frese & Fay, 2001). Previous studies show self-efficacy beliefs and their positive association with exploratory activities such as skill and career development (Blustein, 1989; Lent et al., 2002; Parker et al., 2010). The confidence employees have in their ability to enhance and cultivate skills relevant to their careers is connected not just to their previous engagement in development initiatives, but also to their intentions for future participation in such activities and their overall attitudes towards employee development programs within organizations (Maurer et al., 1996). In his review, Maurer (2001) explores the factor of self-efficacy for career-relevant learning and skill development and proposes that employees who possess greater self-efficacy for development will exhibit more favorable attitudes towards and engage more frequently in voluntary participation in training and development activities. In another research, the investigation focused on the relationship between self-efficacy for development and various variables concerning training and development activities (Noe & Wilk, 1993). Connections were identified between self-efficacy and both the motivation to learn and the amount of time dedicated to training and development activities on an annual basis. In another project, Maurer & Tarulli (1996) discuss the importance of self-efficacy in employees' participation in continuous learning/ skill development activities and suggest that in order for employees to have a positive perception of a developmental feedback program, it's important for them to hold the belief that they are genuinely capable of improving their skills. Therefore, when employees possess a strong belief in their capacity to enhance and

refine their skills, they are more inclined to have positive attitudes towards development activities, showing interest, intention to participate, and ultimately engaging in these activities to enhance their skills.

Contextual Antecedents of Skill Development

In addition to individual differences, contextual factors have been identified to influence on skill development (Collins-Nelson, et al., 2022). Some research has started to explore the impact of context on skill development (Chughtai, 2019), but this is still at its infancy. Thus, more research in this field is required to acquire a deeper understanding of contextual factors involved in skill development process. The present study therefore contributes to the emerging theoretical and empirical research on skills development by examining the impact of servant leadership on employee skill development. The reason for emphasizing servant leadership in this study is its anticipated substantial impact on skill development.

Servant Leadership and Skill Development

Servant leadership's emphasis on facilitating the development and advancement of followers (van Dierendonck, 2011) positions it as a leadership approach with strong potential to enhance employees' skill development. Servant leaders provide individualized support, empowerment, and developmental opportunities that help employees expand their capabilities (Liden et al., 2008). Empirical evidence shows that servant leadership behaviors foster employee skill development by encouraging proactive learning efforts (Chughtai, 2019). Specifically, servant leaders strengthen employees' belief in their capacities (self-efficacy), support autonomy, and help them set meaningful developmental goals—all of which motivate employees to invest time and effort in building new skills (Chughtai, 2019). From a COR standpoint, servant leadership provides a supportive environment that enables employees to invest their resources in

development with greater confidence. When employees feel supported, they can direct their available resources toward learning more effectively, increasing the likelihood of gaining additional resources in the form of new skills. In sum, servant leadership should encourage employees to engage in skill development. Thus, in line with prior research, we propose the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 1: Servant leadership is positively associated with skill development.

Perceived Employability

The study of perceived employability (PE) has witnessed a significant surge in research activity over the past few years, experiencing exponential growth. Bernston & Marklund (2007) defined PE as an individual's subjective assessment of their capacity to secure and retain employment. Also known as career potential (Van der Heijde & Van der Heijden, 2006), PE can be categorized into two distinct forms based on the differentiation between perceived job opportunities within the organization's internal labor market and those in the external labor market. These two forms are commonly denoted as internal PE and external PE and has been studied in conceptual debates (Forrier & Sels, 2003).

The perceived employability concept has been utilized across various segments of the labor market, including (graduate) students, employed, and unemployed individuals. The focus of this study is on those who are currently employed and aim to maintain their current job or to transit on the internal and external job market. This is more compatible with the competence-based approach to employability that centers on an individual's self-perception of their abilities, capacities, and skills that enhance their prospects for employment opportunities (Van der Heijde & Van der Heijden, 2006). Through this approach, individuals evaluate their employability

abilities based on their competencies that account for personal, structural factors, and their interaction.

Skill Development and Perceived Employability

Employees' investments in training and education are expected to strengthen their employability. According to human capital theory (Becker, 1993), developing skills enhances individuals' marketability and increases access to attractive career opportunities. Empirical evidence consistently shows that human capital development-such as acquiring new skills-positively relates to perceived employability (Vanhercke et al., 2014; Wittekind et al., 2010). Consistent with COR principles, skill development represents a valuable personal resource that broadens individuals' capacity to cope with job demands and pursue future opportunities. As employees accumulate new skills, they expand their resource reservoir, which should enhance their sense of employability. Thus, in line with prior research, we propose the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 2: Skill development is positively associated with perceived employability.

Servant Leadership and Perceived Employability

In addition to employees taking their own initiatives, leaders play a crucial role in shaping developmental opportunities that can enhance workforce employability (Liden et al., 2008). Because servant leaders deliberately cultivate conditions that support follower growth and empowerment (van Dierendonck, 2011), their behaviors are expected to exert a meaningful influence on employees' perceptions of employability. By empowering followers and helping them realize their capabilities, servant leaders encourage employees to take ownership of their career trajectories through engagement in developmental activities (Liden et al., 2014). Prior research has shown that such proactive skill development strongly predicts perceived

employability (Eby et al., 2003; King, 2004; Taber & Blankemeyer, 2015). Aligned with COR principles, servant leadership provides contextual resources that facilitate employees' investment in skill development, a resource-building process that subsequently enhances perceptions of employability. Thus, skill development is expected to function as the mechanism linking servant leadership to perceived employability. In line with prior research, we propose the following hypothesis:

> Hypothesis 3: Skill development mediates a positive relationship between servant leadership and perceived employability.

The mediation relationship examined in this study aims to replicate prior findings reported by Chughtai (2019). However, theoretical perspectives suggest that such relationships may not operate uniformly across individuals. This study aims to contribute to theory and prior findings by examining boundary conditions of these relationships, introducing individual factors as potential moderators of the relationship between servant leadership and skill development. Drawing on prior literature and COR theory, personal initiative, perceived self-efficacy, and need for achievement are examined as individual-level characteristics that, as personal resources, may shape this relationship. These three individual differences were selected because they represent complementary types of personal resources through which individuals engage with their environment. Specifically, they capture motivational (need for achievement), behavioural (personal initiative), and cognitive (self-efficacy) resource dimensions, providing a structured and comprehensive basis for examining how individuals mobilize resources in response to workplace demands.

Individual Characteristics

Employee's Personal Inititative

Research in organizational behavior increasingly recognizes employees as active agents who shape their work environments rather than merely responding to external demands (Crant, 2000; Frese & Fay, 2001; Grant & Ashford, 2008). Within this perspective, personal initiative (PI) has emerged as a key construct. Frese et al. (1996) define PI as a pattern of self-starting, persistent, and goal-directed behavior that is aligned with organizational objectives and enacted despite obstacles. PI reflects a forward-looking orientation in which employees go beyond formal requirements to pursue work-related goals.

Action Theory provides an important foundation for understanding PI, suggesting that individuals operate through cycles of goal setting, planning, and action guided by internally constructed objectives (Miller et al., 1960). In organizational contexts, work tasks provide structure, but employees actively interpret and expand these structures through their own goals and initiatives (Frese et al., 1996). As such, PI is embedded in specific work contexts and may vary depending on situational demands and available resources (Frese & Fay, 2001).

Empirical research consistently links PI to positive individual and organizational outcomes. Employees high in PI demonstrate stronger affective commitment and higher performance (Thomas et al., 2010), and teams characterized by high initiative perform particularly well in contexts of innovation and change (Baer & Frese, 2003; Fay et al., 2004). Individuals high in PI are also more likely to shape their roles in ways that increase autonomy, complexity, and developmental opportunities (Frese et al., 2007).

Integrating Conservation of Resources (COR) theory (Hobfoll, 1989, 2001) provides a broader explanatory framework for understanding the function of PI. COR theory posits that

individuals strive to obtain, retain, and expand valued resources such as skills, autonomy, and social support. From this perspective, PI can be conceptualized as a personal resource that reflects an individual's tendency to invest effort in pursuit of future resource gains. Employees high in PI are more inclined to mobilize existing resources (such as confidence, motivation, and autonomy) to acquire additional resources, thereby fostering resource accumulation over time.

While servant leaders provide all employees with developmental support, empowerment, and access to growth opportunities, individuals high in PI may be better equipped to recognize and leverage these resources. In COR terms, they are more likely to invest leader-provided resources into skill acquisition, thereby amplifying resource gains. Accordingly, PI is expected to strengthen the relationship between servant leadership and skill development.

Based on this reasoning, we propose:

> Hypothesis 4a: Employees' personal initiative moderates the positive relationship between servant leadership and skill development, such that the relationship is stronger at higher levels of personal initiative.
>
> Hypothesis 4b: The indirect relationship between servant leadership and perceived employability via skill development is moderated by employees' level of personal initiative, such that the indirect effect is stronger at higher levels of personal initiative.

Employee's Self-efficacy

Self-efficacy, an individual's belief in their capability to successfully perform a task (Bandura, 1986), plays a central role in shaping how employees engage in proactive behaviors. Proactivity often entails psychological risks because taking initiative may challenge established routines and provoke resistance or skepticism from colleagues (Parker et al., 2010). As such,

employees with higher self-efficacy may feel more confident in their ability to navigate these risks, persist through obstacles, and successfully achieve proactive goals.

From a Conservation of Resources (COR) Theory perspective (Hobfoll, 1989, 2001), self-efficacy represents a key personal resource that influences how individuals respond to resource-enhancing opportunities in their environment. Employees high in self-efficacy possess stronger internal resource reservoirs, enabling them to invest effort into opportunities that may yield future resource gains (such as skill development, empowerment, or expanded responsibilities). In contrast, those lower in self-efficacy may be more hesitant to invest resources because proactive engagement feels more uncertain and potentially costly.
Servant leadership provides a resource-rich context by emphasizing follower growth, empowerment, and well-being. Through coaching, autonomy-granting, and individualized support, servant leaders expand employees' access to social (e.g., support, trust), psychological (e.g., confidence, meaning), and developmental (e.g., stretch assignments, feedback) resources (Liden et al., 2014; Walumbwa et al., 2010). Although servant leadership can build self-efficacy over time (Walumbwa et al., 2010), COR theory suggests that followers differ in how effectively they recognize, accept, and convert leader-provided resources into tangible gains. In particular, employees higher in self-efficacy should be more willing and able to invest the resources they receive (such as autonomy, coaching, and learning opportunities) into the acquisition of new competencies, thereby accelerating skill development.

Empirical work indicates that employees with higher self-efficacy respond more favorably to empowering leadership, report stronger psychological empowerment, and are better able to leverage developmental opportunities (Liden et al., 2014). Interpreted through COR, these employees possess a larger initial resource reservoir and a stronger sense of control, which

reduces the subjective risk of investing effort in new or ambiguous tasks. As a result, they are more likely to turn leader-provided opportunities into resource gains notably, skill growth that supports improved performance and career outcomes. Conversely, employees with lower self-efficacy may perceive the same opportunities as more demanding, uncertain, or costly, potentially dampening their engagement and slowing the translation of resources into development. Although self-efficacy is widely theorized to enable employees to capitalize on empowering, development-oriented leadership, its moderating influence may be contingent on contextual factors (e.g., task demands, implementation quality of empowerment, workload). COR theory highlights that resource conversion is not automatic: access to resources must be coupled with the capacity and readiness to invest them under real constraints. Thus, while servant leadership creates conditions conducive to development, the extent to which employees convert these conditions into skill acquisition may vary with their level of self-efficacy. Based on these theoretical considerations, we propose the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis 5a: Employees' self-efficacy moderates the positive relationship between servant leadership and skill development such that it is stronger under conditions of high self-efficacy.

Hypothesis 5b: The indirect relationship between servant leadership and perceived employability via skill development is moderated by employees' level of self-efficacy such that it is stronger under conditions of high self-efficacy

Employee's Need for Achievement

Employees differ meaningfully in their motivation to pursue ambitious goals. Need for achievement reflects an individual's intrinsic desire to set challenging objectives, strive for excellence, and meet high standards of performance (McClelland, 1961, 1965). Achievement

theories suggest that this motive shapes task choice, effort, persistence, and ultimately performance; higher need for achievement is typically associated with a preference for challenging yet attainable goals and sustained effort toward mastery (Kreitner, 1998; McClelland, 1961). In modern work contexts, where roles evolve and skill demands intensify, this motive can orient individuals toward continuous improvement and the pursuit of learning opportunities. From the vantage point of Conservation of Resources (COR) theory, need for achievement can be understood as a motivational resource that directs attention and effort toward resource acquisition and growth. COR posits that individuals strive to obtain, protect, and build valued resources; those with stronger personal resources are often better positioned to invest effort that yields resource gain spirals over time (e.g., skills, reputation, autonomy). In this sense, a higher need for achievement may lower the perceived cost of investing effort in development and increase the likelihood that employees will translate opportunities into skill accumulation and career progress.

Servant leadership creates conditions that are rich in developmental resources (coaching, psychological safety, autonomy, feedback, and access to challenging assignments) by prioritizing follower growth and well-being (Liden et al., 2014). These leader behaviors can expand employees' social and psychological resource reservoirs and open pathways for learning and capability building. Prior work also indicates that employees actively seek to upgrade their skill sets to advance career goals, enhance perceived marketability, and manage increasingly complex job demands (Akkermans et al., 2017; Wang et al., 2019). In principle, employees with a higher need for achievement should be especially receptive to such developmental opportunities, channeling them into deliberate practice, stretch experiences, and targeted learning. Interpreted through COR, servant leadership supplies resources, whereas need for achievement helps

determine the investment of those resources. Employees high in need for achievement may be more inclined to accept challenging tasks, seek feedback, and persist when learning is difficult, behaviors that convert leader-provided opportunities into tangible skill gains. Leaders, for their part, often tailor their resource allocation (such as learning avenues, networking prospects, and complex assignments) to perceived follower motivation and readiness (Caplan, 1987; Ng et al., 2010). This alignment can, in theory, strengthen the pathway from servant leadership to skill development.

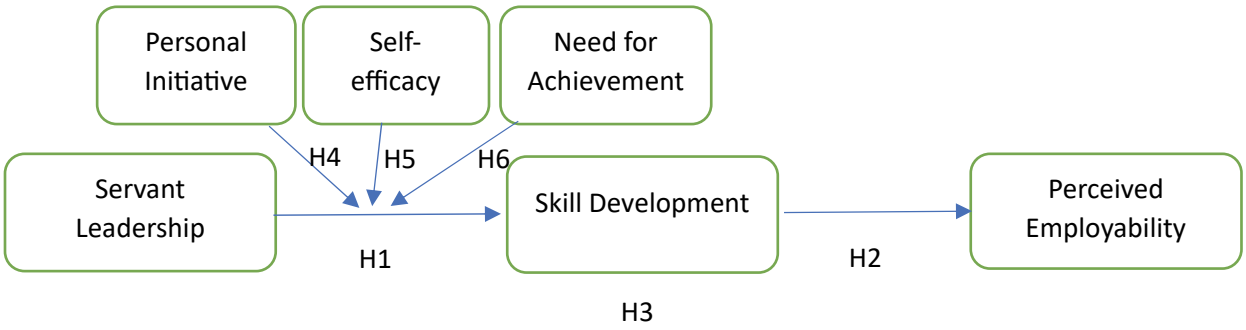
While the theoretical case is compelling, COR also cautions that access to resources does not automatically translate into resource gains. Conversion depends on contextual demands (e.g., workload, time pressure), the quality and timing of developmental opportunities, and complementary personal resources (e.g., self-efficacy, role-breadth beliefs). Thus, even when servant leaders provide developmental support, differences in need for achievement may not consistently manifest in measurable differences in skill development. Nonetheless, the underlying rationale that a stronger achievement motive can facilitate resource investment and growth motivates the following hypotheses:

> Hypothesis 6a: Employees' need for achievement moderates the positive relationship between servant leadership and skill development such that it is stronger under conditions of high need for achievement.
>
> Hypothesis 6b: The indirect relationship between servant leadership and perceived employability via skill development is moderated by employees' level of need for achievement such that it is stronger under conditions of high need for achievement.

RESEARCH MODEL

In summary, this study proposes that servant leadership is positively associated with skill development, which in turn is expected to contribute to employees' perceived employability. In addition, this study contributes to the literature by examining whether employees' personal initiative, self-efficacy, and need for achievement shape the extent to which they benefit from servant leadership's developmental support. Accordingly, these individual characteristics are proposed to strengthen the relationship between servant leadership and skill development. The research model is depicted in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Hypothesized model



METHOD

Participants and Procedure

To achieve the objectives of this research, we recruited participants (N=192) via the online participant recruitment platform Prolific. Participation in this study was completely voluntary. Eligibility criteria included being at least 18 years of age, being employed full-time in an organization, having a direct supervisor, and being fluent in English.

Participants were invited to complete an online survey administered at two separate points in time, approximately four weeks apart (see Appendix). This time-lagged design was

implemented to minimize the risk of common-method variance often associated with single-source, cross-sectional studies. The two questionnaires were identical and required about 15 minutes each to complete. Participants received compensation in accordance with the panel provider's policy. Each survey included measures of servant leadership, skill development, perceived employability, personal initiative, self-efficacy and need for achievement, along with demographic items. Except for the demographic questions, all items were rated on a 5-point Likert scale.

To enhance data quality, the survey included two attention-check items that were unrelated to the study content ("I occasionally eat cement" and "I regularly travel through time and space"). Responses from participants who failed both attention checks were excluded from the analyses. For respondents who failed only one attention check, the overall pattern of responses was examined to determine whether they should be retained in the analyses, as some participants reported confusion or misunderstanding regarding the second attention check. At Time 1, a total of 250 participants completed the questionnaire. Of these, 192 provided usable responses after data screening. Participants who provided valid responses at Time 1 were invited to complete the follow-up survey at Time 2. All 192 invited participants responded, and their data were deemed usable, resulting in a final sample of 192 participants.

Participants ranged from 18 and 64 years of age (M = 34, SD = 9.85), with 52% of the sample identifying as male (n = 100), 47.4% identifying as female (n = 91), and 0.5% identifying as non-binary or third gender (n = 1). Most participants held a bachelor's degree (n = 106, 55.2%) followed by a master's degree (n = 38, 19.8%). Participants worked in industries such as Computer or Information Technologies (15.1%), Accounting or Finance (13%), Education or Academia (13%), Health or Social Services (12.5%), and Engineering or Architecture (11.5%).

Other reported industries included Commerce, Law or Insurance, Restauration, Hotels, or Tourism, Biotechnologies or Pharmaceuticals, Marketing or Sales, Communications or Media, Consulting, Arts, Fashion or Entertainment, and Human Resources. Participants reported being located in a variety of countries, with the largest groups based in South Africa (35.9%), Portugal (13.5%), the United Kingdom (8.9%), Canada (5.2%), Mexico (5.2%), and Poland (5.2%). Smaller groups were located in Italy (4.2%), Greece (3.6%), Hungary (2.6%), Germany (2.1%), Spain (3.1%), and Chile (1.6%), as well as in several other countries including Ireland, Austria, France, Czech Republic, Kenya, Israel, the Netherlands, Norway, Sweden, Argentina, Slovenia, and the United States, each representing less than 2% of the sample. Participants reported an average tenure of slightly less than six years (M = 5.90, SD = 5.95) at their current organization being. On average, participants reported working under their current direct supervisor for slightly over three years (M = *3.33*, SD = 3.36).

Measures

Validated scales were used to assess the study variables. Participants provided their level of agreement on a Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (Strongly disagree) to 5 (Strongly agree). The questionnaire can be found in its entirety in the Appendix.

Servant Leadership. We used the seven-item scale developed by Liden et al. (2015) to capture servant leadership's seven dimensions: *emotional healing*, *creating value for the community*, *conceptual skills*, *empowering*, *helping subordinates grow and succeed*, *putting subordinates first*, and *behaving ethically*. This scale, which measures servant leadersip as a global construct, was developed from the original of SL-28, which was deemed long and time-consuming for participants (Liden et al., 2015). This scale's psychometric characteristics are

robust (Bono & McNamara, 2011). This scale asks employees to assess their supervisor's servant leadership. A sample item is "I would seek help from my manager if I had a personal problem". This scale demonstrated good reliability in the sample at both time points (α = .79 and α = .75).

Skill Development. Skill development was assessed using six items originally developed by Lankau & Scandura (2002) and used by Kwan et al. (2010) and Liu et al. (2009). A sample item is "I have gained new skills in the workplace". This scale had good reliability in this sample at both time points (α = .78 and α = .74).

Need for Achievement.

We measured need for achievement as an achievement orientation using Eisenberger et al. (2005)'s questionnaire. The scale which was originally developped by Steers and Braunstein's (1976) and included five items, but as pointed out by Eisenberger et al. (2005), one item was closer to inclination towards competitiveness than to the fundamental essence of achievement orientation ("I try to perform better than my co-workers"). This item was thus omitted. A sample item is "I do my best work when my job assignments are fairly difficult". This scale had good reliability at Time 1 and acceptable reliability at Time 2 (α = .73 and α = .60).

Self-efficacy. Self-efficacy was measured using the Short Occupational Self-Efficacy scale developed by Rigotti et al. (2008). The employees indicated their agreement to six items including "I feel prepared for most of the demands in my job". This scale had good reliability in this sample (α = .76 and α = .76).

Personal Initiative. Personal initiative was measured using the seven items developed by Frese et al. (1997). A sample item is "I take initiative immediately even when others don't". This scale had good reliability in this sample (α = 80 and α = .81).

Perceived Employability. To measure perceived employability, we used the three-item measure developed by Janssens et al. (2003). A sample item is "I am confident that I would find another job if I started searching". This scale had good reliability in this sample (α = .75 and α =.79).

Demographics. Demographic variables included age, gender, education level, employment status, organizational tenure, supervisor tenure, job level, and industry. These variables were collected to describe the sample.

Ethical Considerations

This study received ethical approval from the Research Ethics Unit at Concordia University. The consent form outlined the study's purpose, procedures, potential risks and benefits, and assurances of confidentiality. It also emphasized that participation was entirely voluntary and that participants could withdraw at any time without penalty. At both time points, participants were required to read the consent form and provide informed consent before proceeding to the questionnaire.

RESULTS

Preliminary Analyses

The analyses were conducted using PROCESS Procedure for SPSS version 5.0 and IBM SPSS Statistics version 31. Prior to analysis, all independent and moderator variables were mean-centered. We used Time 1 data for the independent variable of servant leadership, and Time 2 data for all other variables. Because the constructs in this study were assessed at both Time 1 and Time 2, we were able to conduct post-hoc analyses using both waves of data to

examine the hypothesized relationships. These alternative findings are reported where relevant to provide a more comprehensive picture of the relationships among variables.

Descriptive Statistics

Descriptive statistics and bivariate correlations among the main variables are presented in Table 1. Mean scores indicate that participants reported moderate levels of servant leadership at Time 1 ($M = 2.41$, $SD = 0.78$). The mean score for skill development at Time 2 was low to moderate ($M = 1.59$, $SD = 0.52$) while perceived employability showed a slightly higher mean ($M = 2.24$, $SD = 0.93$). Regarding the moderating variables, participants reported moderate levels at Time 2 for need for achievement ($M = 1.99$, $SD = 0.64$), self-efficacy ($M = 1.71$, $SD = 0.51$), and personal initiative ($M = 1.89$, $SD = 0.59$). Mean values at Time 2 were generally slightly higher than Time 1 for the same variables, indicating minor upward shifts over the measurement period.

Servant leadership at Time 1 was positively correlated with skill development at Time 2 ($r = .34$, $p < .01$) but the correlation between servant leadership at Time 1 and perceived employability at Time 2 was not significant. Skill development at Time 2 was positively correlated with perceived employability at Time 2 ($r = .21$, $p < .01$). Regarding the moderators at Time 2, all three correlate positively and significantly with servant leadership at T1: need for achievement ($r = .49$, $p < .01$), self-efficacy ($r = .38$, $p < .01$), and personal initiative ($r = .41$, $p < .01$). Furthermore, these moderators also show significant correlations with skill development at T2: need for achievement ($r = .44$, $p < .01$), self-efficacy ($r = .50$, $p < .01$), and personal initiative ($r = .58$, $p < .01$). Two moderators were also positively and significantly correlated with perceived employability at T2: self-efficacy ($r = .27$, $p < .01$) and personal initiative ($r = .29$, $p < .01$).

Table 1. Means, standard deviations, and correlations among variables.

Variables	Mean	SD	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.	8.	9.	10.	11.	12.
1. Servant leadership T1	2.41	.775	1											
2. Self-efficacy T1	1.70	.527	.387**	1										
3. Personal initiative T1	1.84	.606	.484**	.728**	1									
4. Need for achievement T1	1.91	.741	.388**	.584**	.664**	1								
5. Skill development T1	1.58	.539	.451**	.580**	.604**	.604**	1							
6. Perceived employability T1	2.18	.891	.193**	.302**	.267**	.198**	.266**	1						
7. Servant leadership T2	2.42	.706	.777**	.340**	.443**	.353**	.361**	.194**	1					
8. Self-efficacy T2	1.71	.516	.380**	.635**	.579**	.434**	.438**	.349**	.419**	1				
9. Personal initiative T2	1.89	.596	.419**	.648**	.776**	.553**	.502**	.317**	.446**	.666**	1			
10. Need for achievement T2	1.99	.641	.493**	.468**	.618**	.678**	.419**	.206**	.475**	.461**	.643**	1		
11. Skill development T2	1.59	.520	.346**	.441**	.490**	.470**	.636**	.204**	.357**	.502**	.574**	.439**	1	
12. Perceived employability T2	2.24	.933	0.038	.264**	.205**	.134	.145	.722**	0.062	.278**	.294**	0.135	.206**	1

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Hypothesis Tests

The hypothesized relationships were tested using hierarchical linear regression modeling using PROCESS Macro for SPSS was used with servant leadership as the independent variable, skill development as the mediator, and perceived employability as the dependent variable. A bootstrap procedure with 5,000 samples and 95% confidence intervals was applied to test the indirect effect.

To test Hypothesis 1, servant leadership was examined in relation to skill development. Consistent with expectations, servant leadership at Time 1 significantly predicted skill development at Time 2, $b = 0.23$, $SE = 0.05$, $t\ (190) = 5.08$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [0.14, 0.32], supporting Hypothesis 1. Following Hypothesis 2, skill development was expected to be positively associated with perceived employability. Skill development at Time 2 significantly predicted perceived employability at Time 2 ($b = 0.39$, $SE = 0.14$, $t\ (189) = 2.90$, $p = .004$, 95% CI [0.13, 0.66]. Therefore, Hypothesis 2 was also supported.

To test Hypothesis 3, the indirect effect of servant leadership on perceived employability through skill development was examined using bootstrapping with 5,000 samples. The analysis revealed a positive and statistically significant indirect effect of servant leadership at Time 1 on perceived employability at Time 2 through skill development at Time 2 ($b = 0.09$, BootSE = 0.04, 95% CI [0.02, 0.17]). Although the overall variance explained in perceived employability was modest ($R^2 = .044$), these results suggest that servant leadership contributes to employees' perceived employability indirectly by fostering skill development.

Hypothesis 4a proposed that personal initiative (PI) would moderate the relationship between servant leadership and skill development. To test this hypothesis, servant leadership (T1) and PI (T2) were entered at Step 1, and the interaction term was added at Step 2. As shown

in Table 2, PI at Time 2 was a significant positive predictor of skill development at Time 2 (β =.53, t = 8.02, p < .001), whereas servant leadership at Time 1 showed a marginal positive association with skill development at Time 2 (β = .12, t = 1.93, p = .05). However, the interaction term was non-significant (β = −.051, t = −0.85, p = .40, 95% CI [−.16, .06]), indicating that PI did not moderate the relationship between servant leadership and skill development, contrary to Hypothesis 4a.

Because the hypothesized interaction was not observed in the time-lagged model, we conducted post hoc analyses using only Time 1 measurements to assess whether a concurrent moderation effect might nonetheless emerge. When all variables were measured at Time 1, servant leadership (β = .21, t= 3.32, p = .001) and personal initiative (β = .46, t= 7.04, p < .001) were significant positive predictors of skill development, and the interaction term was significant (β = .14, t= 2.45, p = .01, 95% CI [.02, .23]), suggesting a stronger positive relationship at higher levels of PI. These post hoc analyses provide limited evidence for a moderating role of personal initiative. In contrast, servant leadership and personal initiative independently and positively predicted skill development, suggesting direct effects rather than a robust interaction effect.

Hypothesis 4b proposed that personal initiative would moderate the indirect relationship between servant leadership (T1) and perceived employability (T2) via skill development (T2), such that the indirect effect would be stronger at higher levels of PI. Consistent with the results reported for Hypothesis 4a, skill development at Time 2 significantly predicted perceived employability at Time 2 (B = .394, SE = .136, t = 2.90, p = .004), whereas the direct effect of servant leadership at Time 1 on perceived employability at Time 2 was not significant (B = −.046, SE = .091, t = −0.50, p = .617, 95% CI [−.226, .134]). The conditional indirect effects of servant leadership on perceived employability through skill development were examined at low

(−1 SD), mean, and high (+1 SD) levels of personal initiative. The indirect effect was significant at low (effect = .045, BootSE = .023, 95% BootCI [.006, .095]) and mean levels of PI (effect = .034, BootSE = .020, 95% BootCI [.001, .078]), but not at high levels of PI (effect = .023, BootSE = .027, 95% BootCI [−.027, .084]). However, the index of moderated mediation was not significant (index = −.019, BootSE = .028, 95% BootCI [−.079, .037]), indicating that the indirect effect of servant leadership on perceived employability through skill development did not significantly vary as a function of personal initiative. Thus, Hypothesis 4b was not supported.

To examine the moderating effect of self-efficacy anticipated in Hypothesis 5a, servant leadership (T1) and self-efficacy (T2) were entered at Step 1, and the interaction term was added at Step 2. As shown in Table 3, servant leadership ($\beta = .18$, $t = 2.77$, $p < .006$) and self-efficacy ($\beta = .44$, $t = 6.69$, $p < .001$) were significant predictors of skill development, but the interaction term was non-significant ($\beta = -0.13$, SE= 0.07, $\beta = -.110$, $t = -1.772$, $p = .078$, 95% CI [−0.280, 0.015]). Thus, contrary to Hypothesis 5a, employees' self-efficacy did not moderate the positive relationship between servant leadership and skill development.

As for hypothesis 4a, we conducted post hoc analyses using only Time 1 measurements. When all the variables were measured at Time 1, servant leadership ($\beta = .26$, $p < .001$) and self-efficacy ($\beta = .47$, $p < .001$) were significant predictors of skill development, and the interaction term was significant ($\beta = .15$, $p = .008$), suggesting that the positive relationship between servant leadership and skill development was stronger for individuals with higher self-efficacy.

Hypothesis 5b extended Hypothesis 5a by examining whether self-efficacy moderated the indirect relationship between servant leadership (T1) and perceived employability (T2) via skill development (T2) such that the indirect effect would be stronger at higher levels of self-efficacy. Consistent with the results for Hypothesis 5a, skill development significantly predicted

perceived employability (B = .394, SE = .136, t = 2.90, p = .004), whereas the direct effect of servant leadership on perceived employability was not significant (B = −.046, SE = .091, t = −0.50, p = .617, 95% CI [−.226, .134]). The conditional indirect effects of servant leadership on perceived employability through skill development were examined at low (−1 SD), mean, and high (+1 SD) levels of self-efficacy. The indirect effect was significant at low (effect = .077, BootSE = .035, 95% BootCI [.017, .156]) and mean levels of self-efficacy (effect = .051, BootSE = .026, 95% BootCI [.008, .109]), but not at high levels of self-efficacy (effect = .025, BootSE = .028, 95% BootCI [−.027, .088]). However, the index of moderated mediation was not significant (index = −.052, BootSE = .036, 95% BootCI [−.131, .012]), indicating that the indirect effect of servant leadership on perceived employability through skill development did not significantly vary as a function of self-efficacy. Therefore, Hypothesis 5b was not supported.

To examine the moderating effect of employees' need for achievement, H6a, servant leadership (T1) and need for achievement (T2) were entered at Step 1, and the interaction term was added at Step 2. In the main model, both predictors were significant positive correlates of skill development (Servant leadership β = .17, t = 2.38, p = .018; Need for achievement β = .37, t = 4.98, p < .001), but the interaction term was non-significant (β = −.093, t = −1.39, p = .16, 95% CI [−.20, .035]), indicating that employees' need for achievement did not moderate the relationship. Unlike for personal initiative and self-efficacy, post hoc analyses at Time 1 confirmed this pattern. Using skill development at T1, both servant leadership and need for achievement were significant positive predictors (Servant leadership β = .25, t = 4.26, p < .001; Need for achievement β = .48, t = 7.82, p < .001), but the interaction term was non-significant (β = .083, t = 1.45, p = .14, 95% CI [−.02, .18]).

Hypothesis 6b proposed that need for achievement would moderate the indirect relationship between servant leadership (T1) and perceived employability (T2) via skill development (T2), such that the indirect effect would be stronger at higher levels of need for achievement. The conditional indirect effects of servant leadership on perceived employability through skill development were examined at low (−1 SD), mean, and high (+1 SD) levels of need for achievement. The indirect effect was significant at low (effect = .072, BootSE = .037, 95% BootCI [.014, .155]) and mean levels of need for achievement (effect = .046, BootSE = .026, 95% BootCI [.006, .106]), but not at high levels (effect = .028, BootSE = .026, 95% BootCI [−.016, .088]). However, the index of moderated mediation was not significant (index = −.034, BootSE = .027, 95% BootCI [−.096, .009]), indicating that the indirect effect of servant leadership on perceived employability through skill development did not significantly vary as a function of need for achievement. Therefore, Hypothesis 6b was not supported.

Table 2. Regression results for the moderating effect of personal initiative on the relationship between servant leadership and skill development.

Variables	(n=192)			
	Unstandardized coefficient (β)	SE	t	p
Constant	1.59	.03	49.17	<.001
Servant leadership	.08	.04	1.93	.054
Personal initiative	.46	.05	8.02	<.001
Interaction	-.04	.05	-.84	.399

All predictors were centered before analysis. R2 = .34, F(3,188) = 33.004, p < .001

Table 3. Regression results for the moderating effect of self-efficacy on the relationship between servant leadership and skill development.

Variables	(n=192)			
	Unstandardized coefficient	SE	t	p
Constant	1.60	.03	47.64	<.001
Servant leadership	.12	.04	2.77	.006
Self-efficacy	.45	.06	6.69	<.001
Interaction	-0.13	.07	-1.70	.078

All predictors were centered before analysis. R2 = .29, F(3,188) = 25.80, p < .001

Table 4. Regression results for the moderating effect of need for achievement on the relationship between servant leadership and skill development.

Variables	(n=192)			
	Unstandardized coefficient	SE	t	p
Constant	1.60	.03	44.01	<.001
Servant leadership	.11	.05	2.38	.018
Need for achievement	.30	.06	4.98	<.001
Interaction	-.08	.06	-1.39	.164

All predictors were centered before analysis. R2 = .22, F(3,188) = 18.001, p < .001

Figure 2. Interaction between Personal Initiative and Servant Leadership on Skill Development

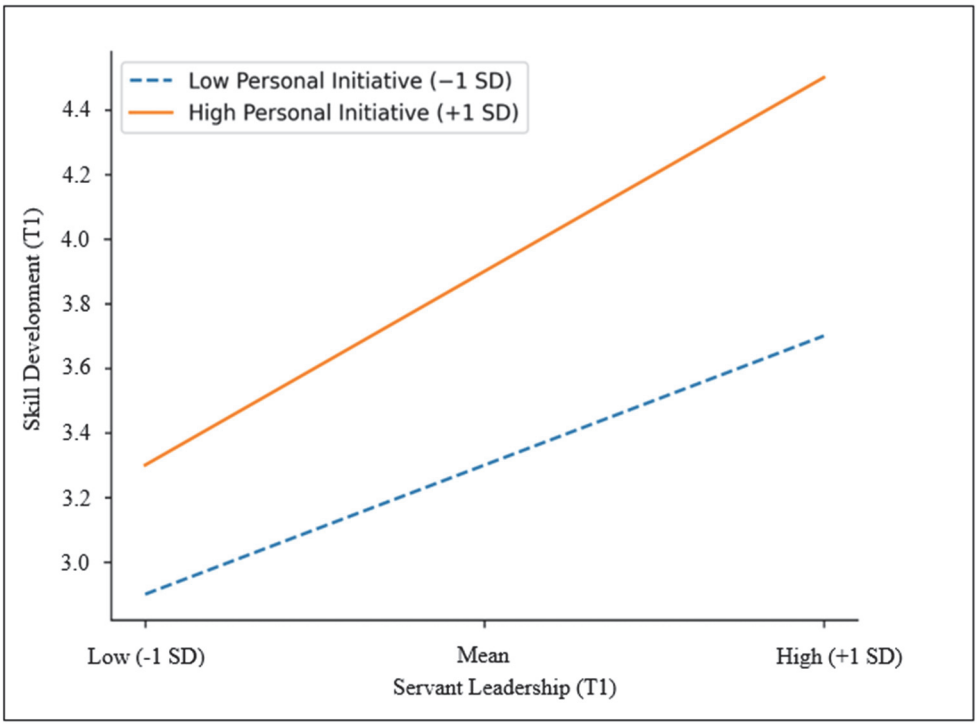
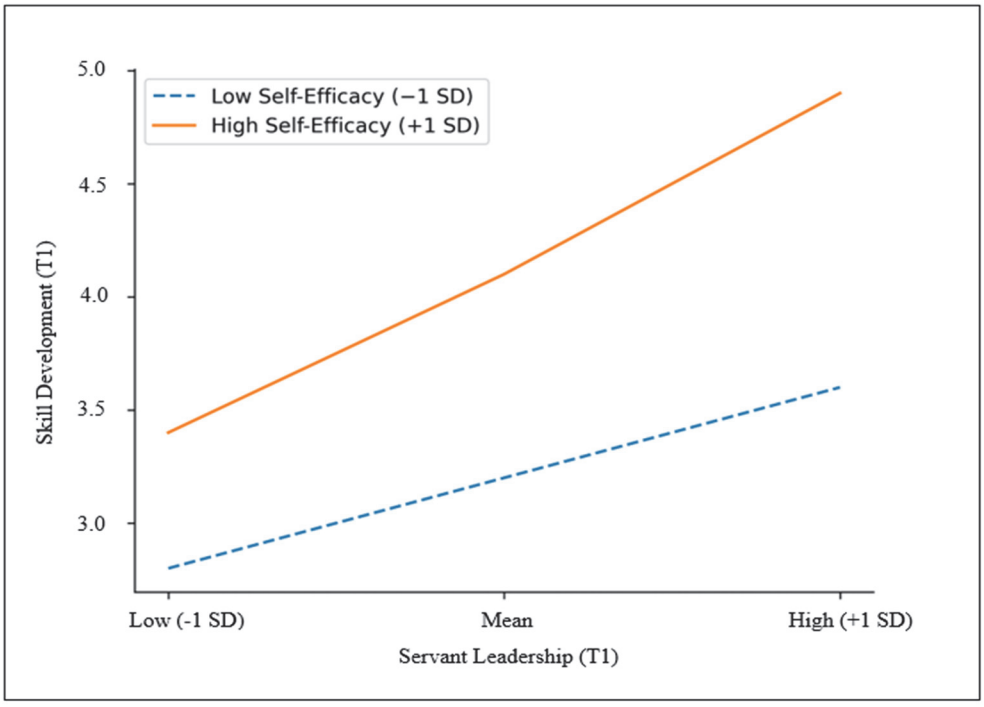


Figure 3. Interaction between Self-efficacy and Servant Leadership on Skill Development



DISCUSSION

General Discussion

Rapid shifts in the job market, including increased expectations for self-directed learning, adaptability, and continuous upskilling, have intensified the need to understand which leadership approaches effectively support these demands. Organizations increasingly rely on leaders who can cultivate growth-oriented environments, yet empirical evidence remains limited on how servant leadership influences employees' developmental outcomes and how motivational characteristics may strengthen or limit these effects. Seeking to address these gaps, the present study examined how servant leadership relates to employees' skill development and perceived employability, and whether three personal resources (personal initiative, self-efficacy, and need for achievement) shape these relationships. Taken together, the findings offer partial support for the proposed framework.

Servant Leadership, Skill Development and Perceived Employability

Across analyses, servant leadership predicted employees' skill development. This pattern supports theoretical perspectives and empirical results suggesting that servant leaders empower employees, provide developmental opportunities, and encourage growth-oriented behaviors. The fact that results held across both time points strengthens the argument that servant leadership contributes meaningfully to employee development and is not simply an artifact of same-source measurement. This aligns with prior research linking servant leadership to learning, autonomy, and competence development. The implications are practical: organizations may need to maintain consistent servant leadership behaviors to sustain developmental outcomes rather than rely on short-term or one-off leader actions.

Skill development emerged as a significant predictor of perceived employability. This reinforces human capital theory, which argues that employees' investment in skill-building contributes to their sense of employability. Moreover, findings suggest that skill development mediates a positive relationship between servant leadership and perceived employability.

Moderation by Personal Initiative, Self-Efficacy, and Need for Achievement

The moderation hypotheses received minimal support, with only two significant interactions emerging across tested models. Both occurred in concurrent Time 1 analyses, where personal initiative and self-efficacy strengthened the association between servant leadership and skill development. These isolated effects are consistent with motivational and self-regulatory perspectives suggesting that proactive or confident employees may be more receptive to developmental cues when assessed at the same point in time. However, the lack of significant interactions in the time-lagged model suggests that these personal resources may not be strong boundary conditions impacting how servant leadership translates into skill development. Need for achievement did not moderate the relationship in any model.

One explanation for these results is that servant leadership may simply provide development opportunities broadly and consistently, diminishing the relative importance of internal resources and characteristics; even employees with lower initiative or confidence may still benefit. Methodological factors, such as sample size constraints, may have also reduced the ability to detect interaction effects. It is equally plausible that these characteristics influence development through different pathways, such as directly motivating employees to practice new skills rather than by amplifying leader effects. These findings signal the need for a more nuanced view of person-level contingencies in leadership–development research, including the potential roles of person–leadership fit, team learning climate, and autonomous motivation. Future work

may also benefit from qualitative approaches to uncover subtle mechanisms that statistical models did not capture.

Independent Contributions of Personal Resources

Although moderation was weak or absent, all three proactive characteristics consistently predicted skill development directly. This underscores their importance as internal drivers of growth, operating independently of leadership. The strongest effects emerged for personal initiative and need for achievement, suggesting that employees who actively pursue goals or are driven to accomplish tasks engage more deeply in development regardless of leadership style. These direct effects indicate that proactive characteristics may act as parallel developmental pathways rather than conditional enhancers of leadership effects.

Theoretical Implications

This research contributes to the literature on servant leadership, skill development, and employability in several meaningful ways. First, by grounding the relationships among servant leadership, skill development, and perceived employability in Conservation of Resources (COR) theory, this study advances a clearer understanding of the mechanism through which leadership influences employees' career-related perceptions. While prior studies have linked servant leadership to developmental outcomes broadly (e.g., Chughtai, 2019; Liden et al., 2014), the present work demonstrates empirically that skill development serves as a proximal resource gain that links leadership behaviors to employees' sense of employability. This reinforces the COR-based proposition that employees convert contextual resources into personal resources when the environment reduces the psychological risks associated with investment (Halbesleben et al., 2014; Hobfoll, 1989).

Second, the findings extend employability and human capital research by showing that servant leadership does not directly shape perceived employability; instead, its influence is channeled through capability acquisition. This suggests that employability perceptions depend less on relational experiences with leaders and more on whether employees perceive real, recent increases in their personal resource reservoirs, in this case, their skills. This supports competence-based conceptualizations of employability that emphasize up-to-date skills as the foundation of career potential (Becker, 1993; Van der Heijde & Van der Heijden, 2006).

Third, this research refines theoretical assumptions regarding individual differences as boundary conditions. Although personal initiative, self-efficacy, and need for achievement have been theorized as resources that help employees capitalize on developmental opportunities (Bandura, 1997; Frese & Fay, 2001; McClelland, 1961), the present findings show that these characteristics did not consistently strengthen the servant leadership, skill development relationship. Importantly, each characteristic predicted development independently but did not reliably moderate the conversion of leader support into skill gains. This suggests that strong contextual resources, such as those provided by servant leaders, may reduce employees' dependence on personal agentic resources for engaging in development. In doing so, the study positions these characteristics as parallel drivers of development rather than necessary enhancers of leadership effectiveness.

Finally, by integrating leadership theory, COR theory, and employability research, this study offers a more unified explanation of how workplace support translates into career-relevant outcomes. The results suggest that servant leadership fosters conditions in which employees can more easily invest their energy in learning, producing skill gains that, when salient, improve their perceptions of employability. This integrated account adds conceptual precision to ongoing

debates about the role of leadership in shaping employees' career adaptability and development trajectories.

Practical Implications

The findings of this research offer several actionable insights for organizations and leadership practitioners seeking to strengthen employee development and employability outcomes. First, the results underscore the importance of consistent servant leadership behaviors in cultivating employee skill development. Leaders who regularly demonstrate support, empowerment, ethical behavior, and concern for employee growth create a resource-rich environment that encourages employees to invest in learning. Training programs for supervisors should incorporate the principles of servant leadership and emphasize how autonomy granting, coaching, and psychological safety contribute to capability building.

Second, because the indirect effect of servant leadership on employability was strongest when skill gains were recent and salient, organizations should pair leadership behaviors with visible and ongoing development opportunities. Practices such as structured stretch assignments, targeted mentoring, regular developmental feedback, and accessible training offerings can ensure that employees perceive concrete resource gains. Keeping skill acquisition highly visible, through skills tracking tools, reflective exercises, or competency-based progress discussions, may further strengthen employees' perceptions of employability.

Third, although personal initiative, self-efficacy, and need for achievement did not reliably enhance the effect of leadership on development, they were independent predictors of skill growth. This suggests it is beneficial for organizations to cultivate these characteristics through interventions such as self-efficacy-building experiences, goal-setting programs, and

autonomy-supportive work design. Nonetheless, the findings also indicate that effective servant leadership can support development even among employees who are lower in these agentic characteristics. Organizations should therefore view servant leadership as an inclusive developmental approach that benefits a diverse workforce.

Fourth, because perceived employability is shaped more by capability enhancement than by relational factors alone, HRD efforts should focus on helping employees see the connection between their ongoing skill development and their longer-term career prospects. Performance management systems, development planning, and internal mobility processes can be aligned to highlight and reward continuous learning, thereby reinforcing this link.

Finally, the modest variance explained in employability underscores the importance of organizational systems and contextual factors beyond the leader. To maximize employability, organizations should ensure that role structures, learning cultures, and career pathways support skill relevance and transferability. When servant leadership is combined with a supportive career environment, employees are more likely to translate resource gains into confidence about their future opportunities.

Limitations and Future Directions

There are several notable limitations to this study. First, the time-lagged, two-wave design, while helpful for reducing common-method concerns, does not establish causal relationships. Future research would benefit from longer multi-wave longitudinal designs that follow employees' development over extended periods to capture the accumulation of resource gains and potential gain spirals posited by COR theory. Experimental or field-quasi-experimental approaches (e.g., leadership training interventions that increase servant leadership behaviors) would further strengthen causal inference by directly manipulating contextual resources and

tracking subsequent skill acquisition and employability perceptions (Halbesleben et al., 2014; Hobfoll, 1989).

Second, the sample was drawn from a single online panel of full-time employees and participation was voluntary. As noted previously, the sample may not fully represent broader employee populations, limiting generalizability. Replication across different organizational contexts, industries, and employment types would help establish external validity.

Third, the study relied on self-report measures for all focal constructs. Because COR emphasizes perceived resources, self-reports are theoretically relevant; however, they may introduce perceptual bias and shared-method variance. Future work should incorporate multi-source assessments (e.g., supervisor or mentor ratings of development, peer feedback on learning behaviors) and objective indicators of capability growth (e.g., certifications, completed training milestones) to triangulate outcomes and better discriminate between perceptual and behavioral change (Halbesleben et al., 2014; Liden et al., 2014).

Fourth, the four-week interval may have been too short to observe durable changes in perceived employability, which often reflect the salience and recency of skill gains but may stabilize over longer horizons. Subsequent studies should examine different lag structures to determine when the indirect effect of servant leadership via skill development is strongest, and whether repeated exposure to resource-rich leadership produces cumulative effects on employability (Hobfoll, 1989; Van der Heijde & Van der Heijden, 2006).

Fifth, the measurement properties of certain moderators (e.g., lower reliability for need for achievement at Time 2) may have constrained our ability to detect interaction effects. Future research should employ more robust, domain-relevant measures of agentic resources and also consider alternative personal resources central to COR, such as resilience or career adaptability,

to test whether some individual differences more reliably amplify the conversion of leader-provided resources into skills (Halbesleben et al., 2014).

Finally, we focused on skill development as the proximal mechanism linking servant leadership to employability. While our results support this pathway, other theoretically consistent mechanisms, such as career self-management behaviors or developmental network quality, may also transmit leadership effects to employability. Incorporating these mechanisms, alongside richer employability measures that tap multiple competence domains, would provide a more comprehensive account of how leadership-supplied resources become career-relevant assets over time (Becker, 1993; Chughtai, 2019; van der Heijde & van der Heijden, 2006). Collectively, addressing these limitations will help clarify when, how, and for whom servant leadership generates resource gains that translate into sustained skill growth and stronger employability beliefs, advancing a more temporally sensitive and contextually grounded understanding of leadership-supported development.

Conclusion

Leadership is a critical channel through which organizations enable positive influence and employee growth. While servant leadership is well established, several aspects of its developmental impact and career-relevant consequences have remained underexplored. Prior research suggests that servant leadership can foster learning and favorable attitudes, yet how these effects translate into employability, and whether employee characteristics reliably amplify them, has been less clear. This study shows that when leaders consistently enact servant leadership (e.g., empowerment, coaching, ethical stewardship), employees more readily invest in skill development, and these proximal capability gains, especially when recent and salient, elevate perceived employability. At the same time, personal initiative, self-efficacy, and need for

achievement did not reliably strengthen the leadership-development link, possibly indicating that these characteristics operate more as parallel, additive drivers of learning rather than necessary amplifiers of leader effectiveness. Building on these findings, future research should examine longer time horizons, multi-source evidence, and complementary mechanisms (e.g., career self-management, developmental networks), as well as team- and system-level enablers, to clarify how servant leadership and surrounding contexts together convert resource-rich conditions into durable capability growth and robust employability beliefs.

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Appendix. Study questionnaire

Servant leadership (Liden et al., 2015)

(1) My team leader can tell if something work-related is going wrong.

(2) My team leader makes my career development a priority.

(3) I would seek help from my team leader if I had a personal problem.

(4) My team leader emphasises the importance of giving back to the community.

(5) My team leader puts my best interests ahead of his/her own.

(6) My team leader gives me the freedom to handle difficult situations in the way that I feel is best.

(7) My team leader would NOT compromise ethical principles in order to achieve success.

Skill development (Lankau & Scandura, 2002)

(1) I have learned how to communicate effectively with others in my workplace.

(2) I have improved my listening skills in the workplace.

(3) I have developed new ideas about how to perform my job in the workplace.

(4) I have become more sensitive to others' feelings and attitudes in the workplace.

(5) I have gained new skills in the workplace.

(6) I have expanded the way I think about things in the workplace.

Need for achievement (Eisenberger et al., 2005)

(1) I do my best work when my job assignments are fairly difficult.

(2) I try very hard to improve on my past performance at work.

(3) I take moderate risks and stick my neck out to get ahead at work.

(4) I am pleased when I can take on added job responsibilities.

Self-Efficacy (Rigotti et al., 2008)

(1) I can remain calm when facing difficulties in my job because I can rely on my abilities.

(2) When I am confronted with a problem in my job, I can usually find several solutions.

(3) Whatever comes my way in my job, I can usually handle it.

(4) My past experiences in my job have prepared me well for my occupational future.

(5) I met the goals that I set for myself in my job.

(6) I feel prepared for most of the demands in my job.

Personal Initiative (Frese et al., 1997)

(1) I actively attack problems.

(2) Whenever something goes wrong, I search for a solution immediately.

(3) Whenever there is a chance to get actively involved, I take it.

(4) I take initiative immediately even when others don't.

(5) I use opportunities quickly in order to attain my goals.

(6) Usually, I do more than I am asked to do.

(7) I am particularly good at realizing ideas.

Perceived Employability (Janssens et al., 2003)

(1) It will be difficult for me to find new employment when leaving this organisation.

(2) In case I'm dismissed, I'll immediately find a job of equal value.

(3) I'm confident that I would find another job if I started searching.

Attention Check Items

(1) I occasionally eat cement.

(2) I regularly travel through time and space.