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Career Adaptability And Self-Efficacy In Relation To Employability: The Mediating Role Of Proactive Career Behavior — A Systematic Literature Review

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Abstract

This study aims to synthesize empirical evidence regarding the relationship between career adaptability, self-efficacy, proactive career behavior (PCB), and employability among Generation Z college students through a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) approach. This study is driven by the urgent need to understand the psychosocial mechanisms that determine students' work readiness amid labor market volatility caused by technological disruption. The article selection process followed the PRISMA 2020 guidelines, involving a systematic search of eight reputable scientific databases, resulting in 31 primary articles published between 2018 and 2026 as the basis for the synthesis. The data were analyzed using a narrative synthesis approach, integrating Career Construction Theory (CCT) and Social Cognitive Theory (SCT) as the primary theoretical frameworks. The results of the synthesis indicate that career adaptability and self-efficacy serve as antecedents—or internal psychosocial assets—that equip students with the mental readiness to navigate the school-to-work transition. These two assets are translated into tangible outcomes through proactive career behavior, which functions as a mediating variable between internal capacities and employability outcomes. These findings confirm that improving students' employability is not merely a passive result of the accumulation of technical skills, but rather an outcome of a continuous psychosocial cycle that simultaneously involves self-confidence, adaptive capacity, and proactive actions. This study recommends that higher education institutions adopt a holistic approach that balances cognitive strengthening and behavioral development in student career preparation programs, and suggests that future research employ a multi-wave longitudinal design to strengthen the causal validity of these findings.

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INTRODUCTION

The global labor market landscape is undergoing a transformation due to technological disruption and economic changes that are increasing the uncertainty of career transitions, particularly for college graduates (Tan et al., 2025; Lee et al., 2025). Under these conditions, employability has become a critical capability that reflects an individual's capacity to secure, maintain, and sustainably develop career opportunities (Atitsogbe et al., 2019; Begum & Venkatesan, 2026). In addition to being influenced by technical competencies, employability also plays a role in bridging the gap between educational outcomes and the ever-evolving needs of industry (Wujema et al., 2022; Li et al., 2022).

The literature indicates that career adaptability and self-efficacy are key psychological factors that support a successful transition from education to the workforce (Atitsogbe et al., 2019; Monteiro et al., 2018). Career adaptability describes an individual's ability to adjust to career changes (Kwon, 2019; Carvalho & Mourão, 2021), while self-efficacy reflects an individual's belief in their ability to face career challenges and persevere in achieving their goals (Doğanülkü et al., 2026; Tan et al., 2025). However, these two factors alone are insufficient to enhance employability unless they are translated into concrete actions.

In this context, Proactive Career Behavior (PCB) serves as a mechanism that translates career adaptability and self-efficacy into proactive actions, such as career planning, competency development, and professional networking, thereby enhancing employability (Peng et al., 2021; Atitsogbe et al., 2019). A number of studies have also shown that PCB consistently mediates the relationship between psychological resources and work readiness, including in longitudinal studies and across various population groups (Doğanülkü et al., 2026; Fazlinda Ab Halim et al., 2019).

Nevertheless, previous research has been dominated by cross-sectional designs and thus has not been able to explain the dynamics of the relationships among variables longitudinally (Spurk et al., 2020; Biramo et al., 2025). Furthermore, syntheses that integrate career adaptability, self-efficacy, PCB, and employability into a single conceptual framework—particularly in the context of Generation Z in Indonesia—remain limited. Therefore, this study employs a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) to synthesize empirical evidence regarding the mechanisms underlying the relationships among these four variables.

Based on the results of the synthesis, a conceptual framework was formulated that positions career adaptability and self-efficacy as psychological factors influencing

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employability, both directly and through the mediation of Proactive Career Behavior (PCB). This relationship is explained through the integration of Career Construction Theory (CCT) and Social Cognitive Theory (SCT), which suggest that adaptability and self-efficacy drive proactive career behavior, thereby enhancing students' employability. This conceptual framework serves as the foundation for synthesizing research findings regarding the relationships among these variables.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Career Adaptability and Self-Efficacy as Antecedents of Employability indicate that career adaptability and self-efficacy are key psychosocial factors influencing students' employability (Atitsogbe et al., 2019; Doğanülkü et al., 2026). Career adaptability reflects an individual's ability to cope with career changes, while self-efficacy provides the confidence to make optimal use of those abilities (Carvalho & Mourão, 2021; Tan et al., 2025). Thus, both constructs serve as psychological capital that supports the enhancement of employability (Wujema et al., 2022).

The mediating role of Proactive Career Behavior (PCB) indicates that the effects of career adaptability and self-efficacy on employability generally occur through Proactive Career Behavior (PCB) (Peng et al., 2021). PCB translates psychological resources into concrete actions, such as career planning, competency development, and professional networking (Atitsogbe et al., 2019). Longitudinal evidence also suggests that self-efficacy fosters proactive behavior, which ultimately enhances students' employability (Doğanülkü et al., 2026; Spurk et al., 2020).

Employability as an Adaptation Outcome: The adaptation process reflects an individual's ability to secure, maintain, and develop career opportunities amid changes in the labor market (Atitsogbe et al., 2019; Lee et al., 2025). The synthesis indicates that employability is influenced not only by technical competencies but also by career adaptability, self-efficacy, and proactive career behaviors, which collectively support a successful transition from education to the workforce (Peng et al., 2021; Doğanülkü et al., 2026).

Self-efficacy, particularly in career decision-making, serves as a cognitive mechanism that transforms adaptive capacity into the belief that an individual is capable of achieving success in their career (Tan et al., 2025; Zhao et al., 2021). Thus, career adaptability reflects an individual's capacity to adapt, while self-efficacy determines the extent to which that capacity is believed to be utilized in facing the uncertainties of the workforce (Doğanülkü et al., 2026a).

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METHODOLOGY

This study employed a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) method in accordance with the PRISMA 2020 guidelines to identify, select, and synthesize empirical evidence regarding the relationship between career adaptability, self-efficacy, proactive career behavior (PCB), and employability (Page et al., 2021). The literature search was conducted across five academic databases using relevant keywords and the snowballing technique. After undergoing the identification, screening, eligibility, and inclusion stages, a total of 31 articles that met the inclusion criteria were analyzed using a narrative synthesis approach.

DISCUSSION

A total of 31 articles that met the inclusion criteria were analyzed in this study. Publications from 2025–2026 indicate a growing focus on the role of career adaptability, self-efficacy, and proactive behavior in enhancing employability amid the dynamics of the labor market. The majority of studies employed a cross-sectional design, although some longitudinal studies have begun to examine changes in career behavior over time. Most studies focused on college students and recent graduates, with a few involving vocational students, students with special needs, and professionals. Additionally, the Career Construction Model of Adaptation (CCMA) and Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT) were the most commonly used theoretical frameworks.

Summary of Included Articles

Table 1. Summary of Included Articles

No	References	Research Objectives	Sample	Design	Key Findings
1	Doğanülkü et al. (2026)	Analyzing a longitudinal mediation model between career self-efficacy and proactive behavior	390 students	Longitudinal	Self-efficacy predicts proactive behavior through career choice clarity
2	Carvalho & Mourão (2021)	Exploring career adaptability as a mediator of professional development and employability	1,105 students	Cross-sectional	Career adaptability positively mediates perceptions of work readiness

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No	References	Research Objectives	Sample	Design	Key Findings
3	Monteiro & Almeida (2019)	Testing the effect of career adaptability on graduates' employment status	696 students	Longitudinal	High self-confidence distinguishes employed graduates from unemployed ones
4	Zhao, Peng & Liu (2021)	Verifying the relationship between instructors' knowledge transfer and employability via self-efficacy	1,062 respondents	Cross-sectional	Self-efficacy plays a significant role in the development of employability across cultures
5	Yu et al. (2021)	Analyzing the role of career adaptability in fostering proactive career behavior	247 employees	Longitudinal	Adaptability positively promotes engagement in proactive career behaviors
6	Castro (2024)	Investigating predictors of anticipatory emotions during career transitions (enthusiasm vs. anxiety)	754 students	Cross-sectional	Occupational self-efficacy and career clarity are strong predictors of positive emotions during career transitions
7	Awad et al. (2024)	Analyzing the influence of leadership on nurses' proactive behavior and career adaptability	304 nurses	Cross-sectional	Proactive work behavior and career adaptability are enhanced through entrepreneurial leadership
8	Neneh (2019)	Examining the role of self-perceived employability in entrepreneurial career choices	580 students	Cross-sectional	Perceived employability strengthens individuals' intention to choose

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No	References	Research Objectives	Sample	Design	Key Findings
					an independent career path
9	Tu et al. (2024)	Exploring the influence of personality traits, self-efficacy, and creativity on employability	588 students	Cross-sectional	Self-efficacy significantly enhances graduates' employability through creativity
10	Griffiths et al. (2020)	To examine the relationship between extracurricular activities and students' self-efficacy	1,308 students	Cross-sectional	Active involvement at the university boosts students' self-confidence in their abilities
11	Malik & Nawaz (2022)	To analyze the mediating role of self-efficacy in the relationship between mentoring and employability	251 bank employees	Cross-sectional	Career self-efficacy mediates the relationship between mentoring functions and internal/external employability
12	Lee et al. (2025)	To examine employability as a catalyst for transition opportunities through career adaptability	334 students	Cross-sectional	Perceived employability positively predicts career adaptability for a successful transition
13	Wang et al. (2022)	To test the effect of self-efficacy on the employability of economically disadvantaged students	651 students	Cross-sectional	Positive self-efficacy predicts work readiness through achievement motivation

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No	References	Research Objectives	Sample	Design	Key Findings
14	Tan et al. (2025)	To investigate the mechanisms through which general self-efficacy facilitates employability	454 students	Cross-sectional	Self-efficacy enhances employability both directly and through career aspirations
15	Spurk et al. (2020)	Investigating the reciprocal relationship between career adaptability and proactive behavior over time	1,477 respondents	Longitudinal	Adaptability and proactive behavior positively influence each other within the same individual
16	Atitsogbe et al. (2019)	Examining the effects of career adaptability and self-efficacy on employability	550 respondents	Cross-sectional	Career adaptability and self-efficacy are primary predictors of work readiness
17	Ma & Chen (2022)	Investigating the mediating role of career adaptability in organizational support and career exploration	524 students	Cross-sectional	University support strengthens career adaptability, which in turn drives proactive career exploration
18	Doğanülkü & Yılmaz (2026)	Analyzing the influence of psychological flexibility on proactive behavior via career adaptability	310 students	Longitudinal	Career adaptability acts as a temporal bridge to proactive career behavior
19	Wang & Dong (2024)	A meta-analysis of the relationship between family variables and career adaptability	14,811 (total)	Meta-Analysis	Family support has a significant positive correlation with career adaptability
20	Monteiro et al. (2018)	Examining the mediating role of	373 students		Career adaptability fully mediates the

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No	References	Research Objectives	Sample	Design	Key Findings
		career adaptability in self-competence and employability		Cross-sectional	relationship between competencies and work readiness
21	Begum & Venkatesan (2026)	Examining the mediating role of self-evaluation in learning strategies and employability	420 college students	Cross-sectional	Self-evaluation (the self-efficacy aspect) mediates the relationship between learning behavior and job skills
22	Halim et al. (2019)	Exploring the relationship between employability skills and self-efficacy among students with disabilities	60 respondents	Cross-sectional	There is a strong positive relationship between self-efficacy and job readiness skills
23	Wujema et al. (2022)	Examining self-efficacy as a mediator in the CareerEDGE model	264 college students	Cross-sectional	Self-efficacy mediates the relationship between work experience and employability
24	Tentama & Nur (2021)	Examining the role of self-efficacy and peer interactions on employability	132 high school students	Cross-sectional	Self-efficacy contributes more significantly (26.7%) to employability than external factors
25	Biramo (2025)	Analyzing the influence of employability on job-search behavior via self-efficacy	326 young people	Mixed Methods	Job-search self-efficacy mediates the relationship between work readiness and proactive actions

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No	References	Research Objectives	Sample	Design	Key Findings
26	Li & Pu (2022)	Menguji peran *self-efficacy* dalam memediasi kapabilitas inovasi ke *employability*	729 college students	Cross-sectional	Innovation capability influences employability through a self-efficacy mediation mechanism
27	Li et al. (2022)	Analisis pengaruh motivasi prestasi terhadap *employability* via *self-efficacy*	512 college students	Cross-sectional	Achievement motivation enhances employability through a self-efficacy chain mediation
28	Zhou et al. (2023)	Analisis pengaruh CDMSE terhadap *employability* melalui kecerdasan emosional	852 college students	Cross-sectional	Career decision self-efficacy significantly enhances employability
29	Tung & Huong (2023)	Analisis peran social *self-efficacy* dalam *employability* lulusan IT	336 graduates	Cross-sectional	Social self-efficacy has a significant positive effect on perceptions of work readiness
30	Römgens et al. (2020)	Meninjau konsep *employability* di pendidikan tinggi dan tempat kerja	-	Conceptual	Employability should be understood as an integration of human capital and contextual factors
31	Jung et al. (2019)	Menguji work volition dan adaptabilitas karier sebagai prediktor *employability*	432 college students	Cross-sectional	Career adaptability is a strong predictor of graduates' employability levels

Source: Author's synthesis (2026) based on 31 included articles.

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A synthesis of 31 articles reveals a consistent relationship between career adaptability, self-efficacy, proactive career behavior, and employability. Most studies identify career adaptability and self-efficacy as the primary predictors of employability, either directly or through the mediating effect of proactive career behavior. The distribution of the relationship patterns among the variables is presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Summary of the Patterns of Relationships Among Variables

Relationships Between Variables	Role Descriptions in the Framework	Number of Articles
Career Adaptability → Employability	Direct predictors of adaptation outcomes	12
Self-Efficacy → Employability	Cognitive drivers of work readiness	14
Career Adaptability → PCB	Resources that trigger adaptive responses	8
Self-Efficacy → PCB	Cognitive motivation for proactive action	7
PCB as a Mediator	A bridge between internal assets and external factors	9

Source: Author's synthesis (2026) based on 31 included articles.

This distribution pattern indicates that self-efficacy is the more dominant direct predictor of employability, while career adaptability and self-efficacy both play a role in fostering proactive career behavior. Based on these findings, the discussion focuses on three main themes: the roles of career adaptability and self-efficacy as antecedents, the mediating function of Proactive Career Behavior (PCB), and employability as an adaptation outcome.

1. **Interpretation of Findings**

   The results of the synthesis indicate that the relationship among career adaptability, self-efficacy, and employability constitutes a psychosocial mechanism that is complementarily explained by Social Cognitive Theory (SCT) and Career Construction Theory (CCT) (Atitsogbe et al., 2019; Doğanülkü et al., 2026). In SCT, self-efficacy serves as a driver of an individual's confidence in tackling career challenges (Bandura, 1997; Tan et al., 2025), whereas CCT explains career adaptability as a psychosocial resource that helps individuals adjust to changes in the work environment (Savickas, 2013; Lee et al., 2025). These two factors are then manifested through Proactive Career Behavior (PCB),

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which translates psychological potential into concrete actions, thereby enhancing employability (Peng et al., 2021; Doğanülkü & Yılmaz, 2026).

2. **Theoretical Contribution**
   This study contributes by integrating the SCT and CCT perspectives to explain the development of employability. The synthesis shows that self-efficacy provides a motivational drive to utilize adaptive resources, whereas career adaptability is a capacity that develops through experience and proactive actions (Savickas, 2013; Spurk et al., 2020). Thus, employability is understood as the result of the interaction between psychological resources and active career behaviors, rather than merely the result of formal education (Atitsogbe et al., 2019; Tan et al., 2025).
3. ***Practical Implications***
   Research findings indicate that improving students' employability requires strengthening both psychological and behavioral aspects simultaneously. Higher education institutions need to develop programs that enhance self-efficacy through career counseling and foster career adaptability through learning experiences, mentoring, and work placements. This approach is expected to foster proactive career behaviors, thereby enhancing graduates' readiness and competitiveness in navigating the dynamics of the job market (Lee et al., 2025; Doğanülkü et al., 2026).

CONCLUSION

Based on the results of a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) of 31 primary articles, this study concludes that students' employability is influenced by the interaction between career adaptability, self-efficacy, and Proactive Career Behavior (PCB). The integration of Social Cognitive Theory (SCT) and Career Construction Theory (CCT) indicates that self-efficacy serves as a source of motivation, career adaptability as an adaptive capacity, and PCB as the mechanism linking the two to improved employability. These findings underscore that developing employability requires strengthening psychological aspects in addition to technical competencies. This study is still limited to 31 articles, dominated by self-report-based cross-sectional studies, and focused on Asian and European contexts. Therefore, future research is recommended to use longitudinal designs, expand the scope of the study population and regions, and explore new factors, such as artificial intelligence (AI) and digital disruption, in the formation of students' employability.

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