Predictors of perceived mental work ability: a systematic review

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Abstract

The concept of work ability has generated much interest in the scientific literature. However, there are still certain aspects that remain unclear with regard to this concept's dimensions and how it interacts with other variables. The goal of this study was to systematically review studies that analyzed predictors of perceived mental work ability, based on the theoretical framework of the job demands-resources model (JD-R) and the European Framework for Psychosocial Risk Management PRIMA-EF. Moreover, we also analyzed whether the studies selected for evaluation addressed work ability as a unidimensional or multidimensional construct. Searches were performed in the Pubmed, Scopus, Web of Science, PsycInfo and PsyArXiv databases with a ten-year limit. Of a total of 1811 potentially eligible studies, 77 were selected based on the established inclusion and exclusion criteria. The results showed that the studies conceptualized this construct as perceived work ability and did not include the term *mental* in their definitions. Of the variables analyzed, those related to personal resources and workplace resources predicted greater perceived work ability. Conversely, age, job demands, psychosocial risks and the absence of both personal and workplace resources were negative predictors. However, with regards to age, positive relations were found when the mental dimension of perceived work ability was analyzed separately. It is noteworthy how limited the body of research is on some personal variables (personality traits and emotional states, aptitudes and physical/cognitive performance, and psychological capital) and attitudinal variables (satisfaction and commitment), as well as certain job and workplace characteristics (industry, job type, type of contract, and type of workday). Finally, an elevated percentage of studies analyzed perceived work ability as a unidimensional construct, resulting in a less precise evaluation of this concept. Practical implications and future lines of research were also addressed.

Keywords: Systematic Review; Work Ability; Perceived Mental Work Ability; Predictors

1. Introduction

Work ability, understood as an individual's physical and mental capacity to perform their job functions with regard to their job demands (Ilmarinen, 2009: Ilmarinen et al., 1991a), is a concept that has generated much interest in the scientific literature, especially in the study of extending working life expectancy (Ilmarinen et al., 1991b). Research into this concept began in Finland in the 1980s, driven by growing concern about an aging workforce. The Finnish Institute of Occupational Health (FIOH) began to develop the study of this construct in the framework of occupational health as a new paradigm in comparison to work disability (Ilmarinen, 2009, 2019). A turning point in the development of the methodology of this line of research was the creation of the Work Ability Index (WAI) (Ilmarinen, 2007, 2009; Tuomi et al., 1998). This instrument comprises 60 items, including both objective and subjective questions, and evaluates seven dimensions: 1. Current work ability compared with lifetime best; 2. Work ability in relation to the demands of the job; 3. Number of current diseases diagnosed by a physician; 4. Estimated work impairment due to illness; 5. Sick leave during the past 12 months; 6. Personal prognosis of work ability 2 years from now; and 7. Mental resources. Despite its widespread use, this instrument has been the subject of broad criticism, which includes questioning the psychometric validity of both the items as well as the response scales (Cadiz et al., 2019).

Subsequently, other studies modified the WAI to evaluate only *Perceived Work Ability*, described as “an individual's self-perception or evaluation of his or her ability to continue working in his or her job” (McGonagle et al., 2015, p.377). As described in the scientific literature, this concept is frequently evaluated by calculating a Work Ability Score (WAS) composed of a single item (Ahlstrom et al., 2010), which is the shortest version of the WAI, or by using the Perceived Work Ability (PWA) scale (McGonagle et al., 2015), composed of four items. The later represents an advance in terms of the concept of perceived

work ability because it evaluates two mental components: one cognitive and the other interpersonal. Despite the success of the WAS and PWA, both of which are easier to apply given their brevity, these versions raise the issue of conceiving perceived work ability as a unidimensional construct because they both provide a total score that does not differentiate physical and mental dimensions. Another instrument developed by Ilmarinen et al. (2015) that addresses this construct from a multidimensional approach is the work ability-personal radar measure. Notwithstanding, this scale also raises concerns as it includes predictors of work ability within the dimensions of the scale itself. Likewise, it is not supported by a specific theory of work nor does it consider other health and psychosocial factors that may be connected to the construct in question (Brady, 2016).

To overcome the issues identified in these different measures of work ability, McCarthy et al. (2024) developed and validated the Multidimensional Perceived Work Ability Scale (M-PWAS) on the basis of the theoretical framework of the Job Demands-Resource model (JD-R) (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007; Demerouti et al., 2001). This model is grounded in the interaction between job demands and workplace and personal resources, and how these influence employees' well-being and job performance. Similarly, it has proven a solid theoretical foundation to analyze employee well-being across different job types (Lesener et al., 2019).

The M-PWAS evaluates 4 dimensions: physical, cognitive, emotional, and interpersonal. It measures perceived work ability without including objective items, which is typical of the WAI (e.g. days of sick leave). When compared to the PWA measure, this scale shows greater validity to predict emotional exhaustion, perceived stress, work engagement, and turnover (McCarthy et al. 2024). Additionally, it provides greater specificity when assessing employees' ability to respond to their job demands. This is essential to designing and implementing more effective interventions that promote improvements in work ability

(McCarthy et al., 2024). As a result, given the importance of an adequate and precise evaluation of this concept for developing effective interventions, it is also important to analyze what variables may influence improvements in the perception of work ability.

In a meta-analysis, Brady et al. (2020) analyzed which variables are related to work ability and which moderators influence these relationships based on the theoretical framework of the JD-R model (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007; Demerouti et al., 2001). Their findings indicate that job demands and age correlate negatively with *Work Ability*, understood as "a person's ability to continue performing their job" (p. 3). On the other hand, workplace and personal resources (psychosocial and health) positively correlate with work ability. Moreover, the results showed which relationships were moderated by the different measures of work ability and employee job types. Another important finding from this study is that the perceived work ability measures provided predictive results similar to the WAI.

Some limitations were identified in the study by Brady et al. (2020). Possible psychosocial risks that may also behave like predictors of work ability were not analyzed. As shown in other studies, factors like violence, stress and fatigue can play an important role (Boelhouwer et al., 2023; Boschman et al., 2015; de Ceballos & Carvalho, 2021; Vertanen-Greis et al., 2022). In their study, these were only considered as outcome variables. Another limitation is the fact that it did not evaluate which personality variables affect the perception of adequate work ability despite previous research having identified positive relations, such as is the case for responsibility or conscientiousness (McGonagle et al., 2015). This is certainly due to the limited research available related to this construct (Brady et al., 2020). Finally, how variables can predict different dimensions of work ability disparately was not addressed. For instance, McCarthy et al. (2024) found that age was a negative predictor of physical work ability, but it was a positive predictor of emotional work ability.

Considering the previously mentioned studies and part of the definition of perceived work ability from McCarthy et al. (2024), specifically, “the ability to meet the physical, cognitive, emotional and interpersonal demands of their current job" (p. 93), the present study defines *perceived mental work ability* as the self-perception an individual has of their ability to meet the cognitive, emotional, and interpersonal demands of their current job. Consequently, the research questions for this study are: 1. Which variables predict greater or lesser perceived mental work ability? 2. Do the studies selected evaluate perceived work ability as a unidimensional or multidimensional construct? Consequently, the objective of this systematic review was to compile and analyze studies that evaluated predictors of perceived mental work ability, based on the JD-R theoretical framework (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007; Demerouti et al., 2001) and the European Framework for Psychosocial Risk Management PRIMA-EF (Leka & Cox, 2008). We also analyzed whether the studies selected evaluated perceived work ability as a unidimensional or multidimensional construct.

2. Methodology

2.1 Search Strategy

The data was compiled by means of a systematic review of multiple academic databases (PubMed, Scopus, Web of Science, PscyINFO, and PsyArXiv) between January and February 2025. The boolean operators "OR" and "AND" were used to construct the following syntax: “perceived” OR “psychological” OR “mental” OR “cognitive” OR “emotional” OR “interpersonal” AND “work ability”. The search was limited to titles, abstracts and key words. The inclusion criteria were: a) population in the workforce; b) original published studies or preprints from the last 10 years (2015–2025); c) articles in English or Spanish; d) quantitative articles with cross-sectional or longitudinal designs; and e) studies that included a statistical analysis of predictors. The exclusion criteria were: a)

qualitative studies, intervention studies, narrative reviews, systematic reviews, meta-analyses, opinion articles, intervention protocols, letters to the editor and short communications; b) studies that analyzed populations that were not in the workforce; c) studies where the work ability score did not include any items that evaluated mental and perceived work ability; d) studies that included serious mental illness; and e) studies about the social-occupational integration of individuals with physical or mental disability.

An initial exploration during the search process yielded 4976 potential studies. In light of this, specific filters were identified for each of the databases to limit the volume of studies returned from the search. The search strategy is summarized in Table 1.

[Insert Table 1 here]

2.2. Data retrieval

The initial search identified 1811 potentially eligible studies distributed as follows: 411 from Pubmed, 496 from Scopus, 596 from Web of Science, 310 from PsycInfo and 3 from PsyArXiv. A total of 885 studies remained after removing duplicates. Two reviewers independently evaluated the titles and abstracts of each article. Of these 885, only 120 were selected for a full text review based on the specified inclusion and exclusion criteria. Ultimately, a total of 77 articles were selected. During the full text review, 34 were removed because they did not meet the inclusion/exclusion criteria. Disagreements were settled through discussion with the lead author who has significant experience in this line of research. The search process is summarized in the PRISMA flow diagram in Figure 1.

[Insert Figure 1 here]

2.3 Data Analysis

The data extracted was manually coded using the following categories: author name and year of publication; design (cross-sectional or longitudinal); country; participant characteristics (profession, average age with standard deviation, and proportion of females); perceived work ability evaluation instrument; and classification of predictors based on the JD-R theoretical framework (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007; Demerouti et al., 2001) and the PRIMA-EF guide (Leka & Cox, 2008). Lastly, key findings related to perceived mental work ability were included.

The categories or dimensions used to classify the predictors analyzed in the studies are detailed below:

- ***Personal characteristics*:** this section included 1) sociodemographic variables (e.g., age, sex, marital status, level of education) and 2) social-occupational variables (e.g., years of experience or labor seniority).

- ***Personal resources:*** 1) psychological capital (PsyCap; Luthans et al., 2006) (hope, efficacy, resilience, optimism) and other personal skills (e.g., selection, optimization and compensation (SOC) strategies (Baltes & Baltes, 1990); 2) physical/cognitive aptitudes or performance (e.g., motor performance, working memory, crystallized intelligence); 3) personality traits and emotional states (e.g., extraversion, positive affect); 4) physical state of health (e.g., not suffering from musculoskeletal disorders, not overweight); 5) mental state of health (e.g., not suffering from depression, anxiety or burnout); 6) general state of health (e.g., having a good self-perception of health); 7) healthy habits or lifestyle (e.g., physical activity, not smoking, low consumption of alcohol); and 8) other personal resources to capture variables not included in the other dimensions (e.g., social support). Variables that were negatively related to perceived mental work ability were also included in this section and were coded as 'lack of

personal resources' (e.g., common mental health disorders, musculoskeletal disorders, poor self-perceived health).

- ***Job characteristics***: 1) field of activity (e.g., industry, health care, education); 2) type of job (e.g., white collar or blue-collar workers); 3) type of contract (e.g., temporary, permanent) 4) type of workday (e.g., part/full-time); and 4) other characteristics to capture other variables not included in the other dimensions.

- ***Job demands:*** 1) quantitative demands (e.g., role overload); 2) physical demands (e.g., ergonomic and physical efforts (awkward postures, heavy lifting, repetitive movements, etc.); 3) mental demands: emotional, cognitive and interpersonal (e.g., emotional burden, effort-reward imbalance, unfavorable security environment, workplace harassment, discrimination, etc.); and 4) working conditions and environment (e.g., noise, extreme temperatures).

- ***Workplace resources:*** 1) job control (e.g., autonomy to make decisions, skill discretion); 2) coworker support; 3) supervisor support; 4) organizational leadership/justice (e.g., age-differentiated leadership, supportive leadership style); 5) organizational resources (e.g., organizational support, workplace equity, health insurance coverage); and 6) other workplace resources to capture variables not classified in the previous dimensions (e.g., workplace tools). Variables that were negatively associated with perceived work ability were also included in this section and were coded as 'lack of personal resource' (e.g., poor coworker support, poor organizational support).

- ***Psychosocial risks:*** 1) violence, 2) stress and 3) fatigue.
- ***Attitudinal variables:*** 1) job satisfaction and 2) work engagement.

2.4 Study quality

A mixed methods tool was used to analyze the quality of the studies, applying only the section related to quantitative non-randomized studies (MMAT; Hong et al., 2018; Table

2 of the supplementary material). The instrument contains seven items. The first two questions are general, apply to any type of study, and function as an initial screening phase. That is, if a study did not meet one or both criteria, it is likely not an empirical study and, consequently, this tool could not be used. The remaining five questions are designed specifically to address quantitative non-randomized studies. The response scale is categorical and includes the options 'Yes', 'No' and 'Not specified' / 'N/A'. This instrument does not provide an overall quality score, but rather offers a detailed breakdown of each criteria.

3. Results

3.1 Descriptive results

The 77 articles included in the systematic review are listed in Table 3 of the supplementary material. The greatest number of studies was published between 2021 and 2023 (34 studies, 44%). With regard to country of origin, the top three were Germany (19 - 24%), Finland (14 - 18%) and the Netherlands (13 - 17%). Moreover, 47 studies (61%) implemented a cross-sectional design, while 30 (39%) were longitudinal. Regarding the industry where participants worked, in 48 studies (62%) recruiting a sample of participants from a specific industry or area of activity (e.g., large-scale surveys) was not identified as an objective of the study. In 11 studies (14.10%), the samples included participants that provided health care and social services, followed by six studies (8%) where participants performed activities in the manufacturing sector and four (5%) related to public administration.

As to the instrument used to evaluate perceived work ability, 39 studies (51%) used WAS, 10 (13%) used PWA, one used M-PWAS and another used WA-PR. Additionally, one study developed its own items, while the remaining studies selected multiple items from the WAI (31%). A total of 67 studies (87%) provided an overall perceived work ability score, while only 10 (13%) provided separate scores for each different dimension.

3.2 Study quality

Of the 77 articles selected (See Table 2 of the supplementary material), 46 (59%) met all seven of the quality criteria included in this systematic review (MMAT; Hong et al., 2018). Additionally, all 77 successfully met criteria S1, S2, 3.2, 3.4, and 3.5. Thus, all the studies stated a clear research question or objective (S1), provided data that enabled analysis of these questions or objectives (S2), included appropriate measures for evaluation (3.2), considered confounding factors through statistical analysis of predictors (3.4), and collected data according to the research plan (3.5).

In 21 studies (27%), the target population was not clearly defined as set out in criteria 3.1. In other words, these studies did not clearly specify the inclusion and exclusion criteria, give explanations why certain participants decided not to take part in the study, or indicate any attempts to obtain a representative sample of the target population.

Regarding criteria 3.3, 18 studies (23%) did not include complete data in their results. That is, in those studies that used a longitudinal design, not all participants contributed to all measures taken at different moments in time. A value of 80% of the participants was considered acceptable for data completeness.

3.3 Predictors of Perceived Mental Work Ability

Table 3 in the supplementary material shows how variables were classified. No study used the term 'perceived mental work ability' as such, even when they did evaluate mental components and other components, including perceived physical work ability. The studies examined only made reference to the term perceived work ability; as a result, from this point forward, *mental* will not be included in the term.

Personal Characteristics

First, sociodemographic variables were the most frequently analyzed variables related to personal characteristics. A total of 17 studies included this type of variable among their predictors. Notably, 13 studies included age, 3 included sex and gender (used interchangeably), one study included marital status, one included sexual orientation and another included social status. The most frequently analyzed variable in these 17 studies was age, and 10 of them found a negative correlation, namely, being older was a negative predictor of perceived work ability. Nevertheless, in line with the literature review, these results should be qualified because they vary based on the dimension being evaluated. Indeed, a positive correlation was noted in three of the studies that expressly evaluated the mental dimension of perceived work ability.

Only two studies were identified that addressed social-occupational characteristics. We observed that greater work experience and more labor seniority predicted lower perceived work ability.

Personal Resources

The most frequently analyzed variable related to personal resources from the studies examined was state of health (physical, mental, and general). A total of 16 studies analyzed mental health, including lack of mental health disorders, low levels of depression, psychological well-being, relational well-being, and social well-being. Four studies showed positive correlations with perceived work ability. The remaining 11 studies identified a negative correlation between poor mental health—burnout, symptoms of depression, distress related to diabetes or COVID-19—and perceived work ability.

A total of 14 studies addressed physical health, 12 of which observed predictors of lower work ability, mainly related to a lack of personal resources. Notable among these were

musculoskeletal pain, obesity, being overweight, symptoms of menopause, high body mass index (BMI) and voice disorders. Additionally, two studies found that a lower BMI and greater musculoskeletal health was a positive predictor of perceived work ability.

General health was analyzed in 12 studies, 7 of which observed that variables like good self-perception of health, not suffering from daytime fatigue or chronic illnesses, and getting good quality sleep were positive predictors of perceived work ability. Similarly, five studies indicated a negative relationship between variables that evaluate poor general health, such as negative self-perception of health, problems sleeping or suffering from illnesses in general, and perceived work ability.

The next most frequently studied variable was healthy habits and lifestyle. Nine studies were identified, in which all the variables related to good habits, such as being physically active, sleeping more, and low consumption of alcohol, predicted greater perceived work ability. Moreover, an additional study showed that excessive sleep and leisure-time walking had an indirect effect on perceived work ability through musculoskeletal health. The inverse was true of those variables related to bad habits and unhealthy lifestyles, such as smoking, sedentary lifestyle, unhealthy diet and not achieving the recommended level of physical activity, which predicted lower perceived work ability.

In fourth position, six studies evaluated the effects of personal resources. The variables identified as positive predictors of perceived work ability were perceived work opportunities, authenticity related to work (how in tune one is with their personal identity at work), doing vocational work, and being future-oriented at work. The variables found to be negative predictors were low overall social support and low work meaningfulness.

Within the dimensions of psychological capital and other skills or resources, we observed that selection, optimization, and compensation strategies (SOC), vicarious post-

traumatic growth (VPTG) and self-efficacy were positive predictors of perceived work ability. In addition, one study found that the use of strengths (characteristics that allow employees to reach their maximum potential) was a negative predictor.

With regard to aptitude, five studies observed that both variables related to greater cognitive and greater physical performance predicted greater perceived work ability. Among these were crystallized intelligence, working memory, and motor performance. Moreover, two studies showed that cognitive complaints were associated with lower perceived work ability. Finally, four studies analyzed personality traits and emotional states. Notable among the variables that predicted greater perceived work ability were emotional stability, conscientiousness, positive affect, perceived control, psychological detachment and low levels of fear-avoidance beliefs. Lastly, one study found a negative relationship between sense of control and negative affect, and perceived work ability.

Job Characteristics and Working Conditions

Of the studies that addressed job characteristics, two analyzed job types, two analyzed type of workday, one analyzed contract conditions, while another two studies analyzed other characteristics. The results indicate that high-skilled jobs (white-collar workers) and more working hours (full-time work or working more hours per week) were determinants of greater perceived work ability. In this vein, other studies showed that shift work, low-skilled jobs and poor working conditions were negative determinants.

Job Demands

First, the effects of mental demands (emotional, cognitive and interpersonal) on perceived work ability were analyzed in a total of 18 studies. Of these, 15 indicated that excess mental job demands predicted lower perceived work ability. Other studies found positive associations between 'characteristics of knowledge' (job complexity, information

processing, conflict resolution, specialization), low or moderate mental strain and non-monotonous work. Also, one study showed that extreme emotional job demands were also a significant predictor, though it did not indicate the direction of the relationship.

Second, quantitative demands were addressed in 12 studies. Of these, 11 indicated that excess quantitative demands were a negative predictor of perceived work ability. Regarding physical demands, 7 of these 11 studies showed that greater physical demands predicted lower perceived work ability, one of which highlighted an indirect link by way of musculoskeletal health. Three of the eleven studies found that lower physical demands predicted greater perceived work ability. The remaining study identified physical job demands as a significant predictor, though it did not indicate in which direction.

As to working conditions, three studies indicated that all unfavorable working conditions, such as perceived poor work climate or thermal discomfort, were negative determinants of perceived work ability.

Workplace Resources

The results examined indicate organizational resources (13 studies), job control (10 studies), coworker support (7 studies), perceived leadership/organizational justice (5 studies), supervisor support (4 studies) and other workplace resources (2 studies) as predictors of greater perceived work ability. Likewise, low coworker support (one study) and low organizational support (one study) predicted lower perceived work ability.

Psychosocial Risk

Work-related stress (six studies), fatigue (two studies), and violence (one study) were determinants of lower perceived work ability. Furthermore, an additional study confirmed that alert fatigue and increased workplace judgment were significant determinants of working ability, though the relationship was not specified.

Attitudinal Variables

Three studies addressed attitudinal variables. Job dissatisfaction and excess job involvement and commitment predicted lower perceived work ability.

3.4 Perceived work ability as a multidimensional construct

Only ten studies analyzed perceived work ability as a multidimensional construct. Of these, four studies analyzed only two dimensions, five studies analyzed three dimensions, but only a single study analyzed a full four dimensions.

The studies that analyzed two dimensions either differentiated between physical and mental work ability or between general and mental work ability.

The group of studies that analyzed three dimensions either distinguished between general, work, and mental work ability or between physical, emotional and perceived work ability at two years time.

The study that used four dimensions differentiated between physical, cognitive, emotional and interpersonal work ability.

These results indicate that predictors can influence differentially based on which dimension is analyzed. For instance, obesity and being overweight predicted lower physical work ability, but not lower mental work ability. Likewise, having three or more medical conditions only influenced physical work ability. Furthermore, job autonomy was found to be a positive determinant of cognitive, interpersonal, and emotional work ability but not physical work ability, whereas workplace social support was only a predictor for the emotional dimension.

4. Discussion

The purpose of this systematic review was to compile and analyze studies that analyzed determinants or predictors of perceived mental work ability, based on the JD-R framework (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007; Demerouti et al., 2001) and the European Framework for Psychosocial Risk Management PRIMA-EF (Leka & Cox, 2008). Additionally, we analyzed whether the studies selected evaluated perceived work ability as a unidimensional or multidimensional construct.

We observed that the studies selected for analysis did not refer to the construct perceived mental work ability, as such. While these studies did analyze the dimensions that describe this construct, it was defined and referred to simply as perceived work ability, even when they did analyze physical work ability or overall work ability. As a result, this version of the term was used to perform the search and analysis.

Broadly, the variables observed in the studies, which were categorized according to the JD-R model (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007; Demerouti et al., 2001), are in line with the findings from Brady et al. (2020). Results from this systematic review show that older age and high job demands were negative predictors of perceived work ability. Notwithstanding, three studies also observed that age could act as a positive factor when analyzed specifically from the mental dimension of perceived work ability. This finding may be related to experience, which likely plays an important role in the way basic cognitive processes can improve with age (Salthouse, 1994). Additionally, as workers age they may adopt more effective coping strategies, indicating a relationship with better emotional regulation (Carstensen et al., 2011; Scheibe et al., 2016).

Workplace and personal resources were also positive predictors of perceived work ability. This supports the current view from the scientific literature that indicates a positive relationship (Brady et al., 2020; Cadiz et al., 2019).

A novel finding from the present systematic review is the use of attitudinal variables as antecedents of perceived work ability rather than outcome variables. In this sense, psychosocial risk variables like stress, violence and fatigue, as well as attitudinal variables, such as job dissatisfaction and excessive job commitment, were significant determinants of lower perceived work ability. Accordingly, and in line with Bakker and Demerouti's (2024) most recent proposals, these variables can be interpreted to have bidirectional effects. On the one hand, an imbalance between job demands and resources may result in violence, stress, fatigue, dissatisfaction or excessive commitment, and in turn, these variables may influence the development of low perceived work ability. Interpreting the predictive relationship these variables have with perceived work ability is important to developing effective interventions. For instance, previous studies found that people who had been trained to handle work-related stress increased their work ability (Sahlin et al., 2014; Wu et al., 2006), reduced sick leave (Sahlin et al., 2014), and decreased their level of psychological distress (Virgili, 2015).

There were relatively few studies that addressed job characteristics and working conditions in comparison to the other observed variables. It is worth noting, however, that when compared to part-time work, full-time work is associated with greater perceived work ability. In fact, one study indicated that those individuals who were employed part time were less likely to report good or very good work ability. These findings are in line with the results of a Finnish survey from 2000 (Gould et al., 2008) that asserted full-time workers perceived greater work ability than part-time workers. Moreover, it is essential to specifically examine job type when analyzing these relationships since, as noted in the meta-analysis

performed by Brady et al. (2020), job type can act as a moderating factor (e.g., jobs with high physical demands or jobs with high psychological demands).

Only one study analyzed personality traits and found that, of McCrae and Costa's (1997) five dimensions (responsibility, neuroticism, extraversion, openness, and friendliness), only responsibility and emotional stability positively predicted perceived work ability (McGonagle et al., 2015). However, these conclusions cannot be extrapolated to the category of personality traits as a personal resource in the present systematic review. While sufficient scientific literature addressing this topic was not identified, some studies have, indeed, shown the importance of personality in concepts related to work ability. For instance, He et al. (2019) found responsibility and emotional stability to be significant factors in explaining work performance in a second-order meta-analysis.

Similarly, to personality variables, limited scientific literature analyzing psychological capital (PsyCap) (Luthans et al., 2006) was identified despite proving to be a variable of particular importance for the well-being of workers, their performance, and organizational results (Nasreen et al., 2024).

Finally, a low percentage of studies (13%) considered the multidimensionality of perceived work ability on a practical level; in other words, even though some studies described work ability as multidimensional, they did not use or provide measures that facilitated differentiated scores for each of the identified dimensions. Rather, they only provided an overall or unidimensional score for work ability. Consequently, the present study coincides with the conclusions from McCarthy et al. (2024) that the majority of the scientific literature to date does not take into account whether workers perceive different types of work demands differentially; in point of fact, this type of differential analysis is not taken into account (between physical, cognitive, emotional, and interpersonal work ability).

4.1 Practical implications

There are multiple practical implications to understanding how social-occupational, sociodemographic, and personality characteristics, as well as personality traits, attitudes and other personal resources, together with workplace resources, can influence perceived work ability.

Firstly, these results can help organizations to design more effective interventions and programs that promote physical, emotional, cognitive, and interpersonal work ability among employees, taking into consideration different job types and professions.

These results can also help in the design of new instruments to evaluate perceived work ability that include other personal variables not presently taken into account in the literature, such as personality or affect.

Finally, the present study promotes continued participation in the labor market. Working with variables that strengthen perceived work ability can increase workers' levels of adaptation, prolonging their working life expectancy and reducing the risk of exclusion from the job market.

4.2 Limitations and future lines of research

It is important to recognize the inherent limitations of the present study when considering the results. First, no studies were identified that defined the term perceived mental work ability as the self-perception an individual has of their ability to meet with the cognitive, emotional and interpersonal demands of their current job. Only the study by McCarthy et al. (2024) defined mental work ability and differentiated between two components: cognitive and emotional. While it did also consider an interpersonal component, this was not included in the mental dimension. As a result, future studies should develop a new theoretical framework based on this concept.

Second, only ten studies were identified that analyzed different dimensions of perceived work ability in the evaluation of their results, which impedes the generalization of these findings. We encourage analysis of perceived work ability as a multidimensional construct in future studies because it will lead to a more precise evaluation. This is particularly relevant given that, as noted by McCarthy et al. (2024), a variable can have a differential relationship with the various dimensions (physical, cognitive, emotional, and interpersonal) of work ability.

Third, only four studies were found that evaluated personality traits or emotional states, which represents a clear gap in the current literature on the topic. It is likely that personality plays an important role in the actual perception of perceived work ability. Previous studies have found different relations between the five personality traits and burnout (Angelini, 2023). Moreover, additional studies have also touched on the importance of personality and affect, both negative and positive, for job performance (He et al., 2019; Kaplan et al., 2009). As a result, evaluating how these variables influence perceived work ability may prove to be critical for future studies.

Fourth, the present review did not consider studies that evaluated work ability through the use of objective items, such as the WAI. Only studies that used measures where the subject evaluated their own perception of work ability were analyzed. This fact alone restricts the reach of the review. Furthermore, the present study focused exclusively on analyzing predictors and did not analyze other possible mechanisms for more complex interactions. The scientific literature on this topic indicates that certain variables may have a bidirectional effect. For instance, a poor state of health may be a risk factor for developing impaired work ability. In turn, low work ability may also be conducive to further health problems (Cadiz et al., 2019).

Finally, given the present study was based on the qualitative synthesis of previous research, effect size was not considered; likewise, the way different professions may influence the relationship between predictors and perceived mental work ability was not examined. As shown in the study by Brady et al. (2020), job type may be an important moderator that influences these relations. Consequently, future studies should consider how job categories moderate the relation between antecedents and different dimensions of perceived work ability. Furthermore, it would also be relevant to explore possible mediating variables, such as engagement or strain, since the JD-R model highlights the importance of these variables in the relationship between demands, resources and work outcomes (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007; Demerouti et al., 2001).

5. Conclusion

The present systematic review did not identify studies that used the term perceived mental work ability, even when they did evaluate components of this concept. Additionally, we found that the most frequently analyzed variables of perceived work ability in the scientific literature over the last ten years were personal resource variables, followed by job demands, workplace resources, personal characteristics, psychosocial risks, job characteristics and attitudinal variables. The results of the present study show that personal and workplace resources predicted greater perceived work ability. Likewise, the lack of personal and workplace resources, job demands and psychosocial risks predicted lower perceived work ability. Regarding personal characteristics, age displayed both positive and negative relations, depending on which dimension of perceived work ability was analyzed.

It is also worth noting the limited volume of research found on attitudinal variables (satisfaction and commitment), personal resources (personality traits and emotional states, psychological capital, aptitudes and cognitive/physical performance) and job characteristics

(industry, job type, working conditions, and workday type). Finally, we observed that an elevated percentage of studies evaluated perceived work ability unidimensionally.

6. References

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