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# Navigating the boomerang mobility process: A conceptual framework and agenda for future research

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## Abstract

What happens when people leave an organization but return to it later? Expanding the dominant organizational and HRM perspectives on boomerang employment, we advocate for a career transition approach that incorporates an individual focus. We define the boomerang mobility process as a series of career transitions, starting with the exit transition from the original employer, and ending with the boomerang transition when that employee returns to that original employer. We offer a comprehensive conceptual model of the boomerang mobility process, including its antecedents, mediating processes, outcomes, and boundary conditions. By providing insights into the organizational and individual considerations that may influence employees' decision to rejoin an organization, this conceptual model expands the career mobility scholarship and offers a more nuanced understanding of individuals' career development.

## KEYWORDS

boomerang employment, boomerang mobility, boomerang transition, career transition, turnover

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## INTRODUCTION

*Boomerang employment* refers to a transition away from an organization, followed by a return to the same employer at a later date (Klotz et al., 2021). Boomerang employment has become increasingly common, with studies indicating that it may account for up to 28% of new hires in the U.S. (Klotz et al., 2023). On LinkedIn, boomerang employees were found to represent 4.5% of all external hires in 2021 (Dill, 2021). Furthermore, a cross-national study conducted in the U.S., U.K., France, Germany, the Netherlands, and Mexico found that in 2022, around 20% of employees who had quit their jobs during the pandemic had been rehired by the same employers (Nair, 2024). Accordingly, boomerang employment has received growing attention in business magazines, ultimately being identified as one of the key workplace trends for 2024 (Nair, 2024). Such interest is not surprising, as boomerang employment has been suggested not only to address talent shortages in a tight labor market but also to offer organizations an opportunity to hire employees with enhanced skills, firm-specific experience, and an understanding of the organizational culture and processes (Kehoe et al., 2024; Keller et al., 2021; Wang & Cotton, 2025).

Prior research on boomerang employment is predominantly situated in the human resource management (HRM) literature. These studies have generated important insights into the phenomenon from the organizational perspective, highlighting its implications for aspects critical to organizational efficacy such as employee commitment, performance, and turnover rates (Arnold et al., 2021; Bolt et al., 2022; Booth-LeDoux et al., 2019; Kehoe et al., 2024; Keller et al., 2021; Swider et al., 2017). Discussions frequently revolve around the financial pragmatism of rehiring former employees (labeled as “rehires”; e.g., Grohsjean et al., 2024), including cost efficiency in recruitment and onboarding processes.

There are three crucial limitations to this organization-centric view. First, it overlooks the individual's perspective on the entire mobility process that precedes and follows the return to a previous employer. Preliminary findings hint at the importance of such an individual perspective, with reports of specific characteristics (e.g., legacy identification with one's ex-employer; Tian et al., 2022) and perceptions (e.g., of greater team cohesion; Schärer & Sender, 2023) positively associated with the decision to engage in boomerang employment. Similarly, other work shows evidence of positive outcomes of boomerang employment for the individual (e.g., higher job satisfaction; Snyder et al., 2021). Relatedly, Sullivan and Al Ariss (2021) identified research on individuals' reasons for engaging in boomerang employment as an emerging trend in career transition research. Despite these initial insights, however, research has yet to explore the nuanced characteristics of individual experiences of boomerang employment.

Second, prior boomerang employment research has overlooked the complex, cyclical nature of today's careers and career transitions, including those back to a previous employer; thus, individual career processes and outcomes of boomerang employment remain understudied. Notably, although some studies have sought to reunite both HR and career perspectives, they focused on the performance patterns of boomerang employees (e.g., Arnold et al., 2021; Swider et al., 2017) rather than on the boomerang phenomenon as a specific career decision and type of career transition. Further, while focusing on boomerang employees' subjective career success, Snyder et al. (2021) compared it with that of non-boomerang employees—a comparison that risks oversimplifying this transition to a binary status (i.e., being vs. not being a boomerang employee), thus overlooking the intra-individual processes and the complex and dynamic nature of modern career transitions. In contrast, research on career transitions has pointed to a wide variety of factors that can influence the transition process and outcomes (for reviews, see

Akkermans et al., 2024; Sullivan & Al Ariss, 2021). There is thus a need for a nuanced examination of how individuals navigate the complexities of re-entering previous workspaces to better understand both the psychological mechanisms involved (e.g., renegotiating psychological contracts; Rousseau et al., 2018; Snyder et al., 2021; or enhancing career proactivity; Jiang et al., 2023) and the decisions' impact on various individual outcomes.

Finally, an individual, career-centric perspective on boomerang employment is needed to address an important limitation in the career transitions literature—the strong focus on predictable and normative transitions in early and late careers (i.e., college-to-work and work-to-retirement transitions) at the expense of idiosyncratic work-to-work career transitions (currently representing only 3% of career transitions research; Akkermans et al., 2024). Despite not being explicitly mentioned in the above-cited review, boomerang employment represents such a work-to-work career transition that may occur at any point in early, mid, or late careers. In a similar vein, Sullivan and Al Ariss (2021) called for greater scholarly attention to other types of career mobility besides hierarchical advancement in career transitions research, as well as for studies exploring the interaction between individual agency and organizational structure to understand why employees may decide to return to a previous employer.

To address these three limitations, we build on recent advancements from the career transitions literature (e.g., Akkermans et al., 2024; George et al., 2022; Sullivan & Al Ariss, 2021) and focus on the entire *boomerang mobility process* from an individual perspective, thereby complementing the available organizational HR perspective (e.g., Arnold et al., 2021; Maier, Laumer, Joseph, et al., 2021). Specifically, we provide a framework for studying the boomerang mobility process, with three main contributions. First, we offer a clear definition and conceptualization of the boomerang mobility process, highlighting it as a series or even an accumulation of career transitions from an individual-centric viewpoint while integrating it with the current organizational perspective. Second, we clarify the antecedents, characteristics, psychological processes, and outcomes of boomerang transitions at both individual and organizational levels. Third, we propose an agenda for careers, applied psychology, and human resource management research aimed at solving the various identified challenges of boomerang transitions.

Our perspective opens new avenues for research on the boomerang mobility process and its role in contemporary careers (Hom et al., 2017; Sullivan & Al Ariss, 2021). Notably, we advance and integrate the boomerang mobility and career transition literatures: while the boomerang mobility process initially mirrors a conventional career transition (or exit transition/turnover), it extends further into a double career transition or possible “accumulation” of career transitions between several organizations before eventually returning. Finally, we implement George et al.'s (2022) recommendation for role transition research to consider the whole self in both work and nonwork roles and the psychological processes involved, expanding this notion to the boomerang employment literature.

## A CAREER TRANSITION APPROACH TO THE BOOMERANG MOBILITY PROCESS

Our model conceptualizes the boomerang mobility process as a series of career transitions. *Career transitions* refer to a multifaceted process that involves individuals' preparation for, engagement in, and adaptation to significant shifts in the content and context of their work lives (Akkermans et al., 2024). Prior research has provided many valuable insights into how career transitions unfold across the lifespan. For example, Sullivan and Al Ariss's (2021)

literature review identified the five major theoretical perspectives in career transition research: career stage, decision-making, adjustment, relational, and identity. Sullivan and Al Ariss's (2022) model further emphasizes career transitions as often crossing several boundaries between job, department, organization, geographic location, occupation, industry, and labor force—the more boundaries crossed, the more complex the transition. Another important work in this area is George et al.'s (2022) review on role transitions. Their experience-based framework emphasizes the person's transitioning (a) within their network (emphasizing the impact of their social context); (b) being whole (highlighting interrelated work and nonwork roles); and (c) in four transition-related movements: psychological, physical, behavioral, and relational. Finally, the most recent review of career transition research (Akkermans et al., 2024) offers a unified framework at the individual level. Their self-regulation framework of career transitions emphasizes individuals' goal of having a successful career transition, which necessitates the self-regulation of one's motivations, cognitions, affect, and behaviors. It also highlights key boundary conditions at the individual and contextual levels. A career transition—and, in the case of boomerang employment, a series of career transitions—is finally conceptualized as inherently unfolding over time (Akkermans et al., 2024; Sullivan & Al Ariss, 2021).

In the current paper, we build on these prior efforts to develop a boomerang mobility process model. As a starting point, we introduce the following definition:

The *boomerang mobility process* involves a series of career transitions, starting with the *exit transition* from the original employer ("Organization A"), and ending with the *boomerang transition* when that employee returns to that original employer.

As shown in Figure 1, our model proposes that the boomerang mobility process encompasses an initial exit transition when, after having worked at Organization A (phase a), a person leaves Organization A to move to Organization B (phase b). That employee then initiates the boomerang transition when moving back to Organization A (possibly after additional transitions from Organization B to other Organizations C, D, etc.; phase c). This definition thus primarily focuses on boomerang transitions between organizations—inherently addressing changes in job roles, teams, departments, or geographical locations (Sullivan & Al Ariss, 2021). We refer to the factors in phase (a) leading to the initial exit transition as *distal antecedents* of the boomerang transition event. These are present during the individual's exit transition from Organization A and may still be present and/or relevant when the individual transitions back to Organization A. The second set of factors shaping the boomerang transition event are *proximal antecedents*, which are present when the individual works for Organization B (or Organization C, D, E, etc.) in phase (b). Finally, the boomerang transition to Organization A results in specific *outcomes* occurring in phase (c).

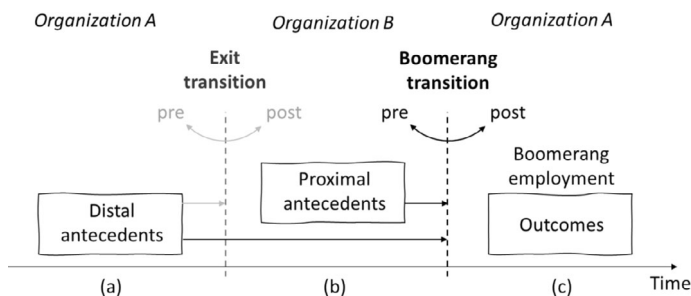
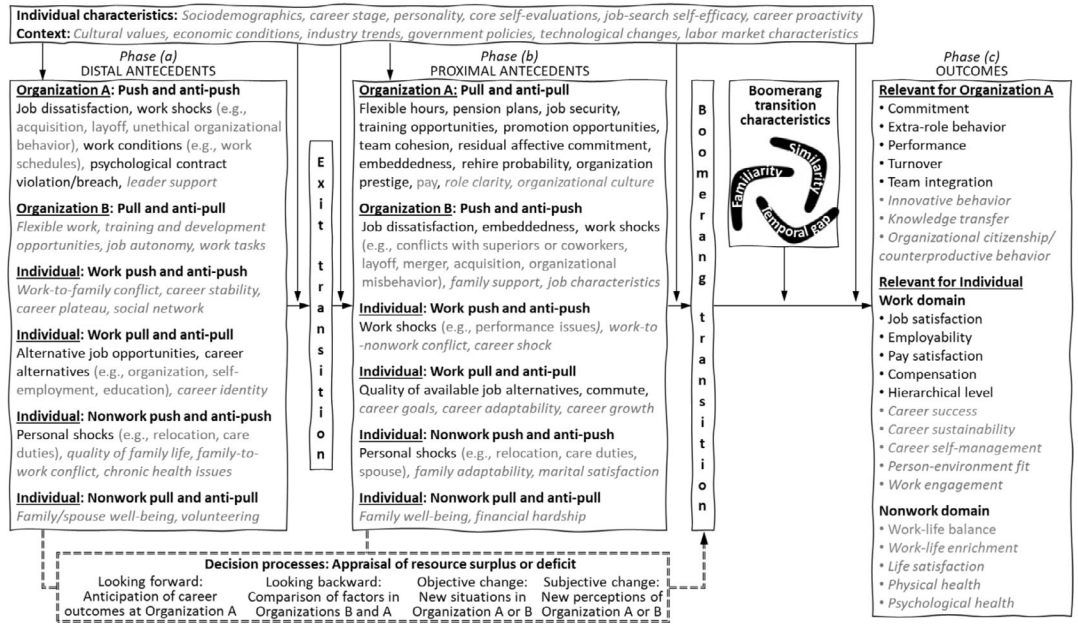


FIGURE 1 The boomerang mobility process.

# ANTECEDENTS OF THE BOOMERANG TRANSITION

In this section, we first draw from existing research on boomerang employment to review antecedents of boomerang transitions. Expanding the literature reviews on general organizational-level (e.g., Forner et al., 2024; Jo & Ellingson, 2019; Rubenstein et al., 2018; Zimmerman et al., 2016) and individual-level (e.g., Akkermans et al., 2024; Rodrigues et al., 2019; Sullivan & Al Ariss, 2021) antecedents of career transitions, we further suggest a categorization of these antecedents according to three characteristics: distal versus proximal; pull, anti-pull, push, anti-push; and at the organizational versus individual level<sup>1</sup> – and within the individual level, as pertaining to the work versus nonwork domains (George et al., 2022).

To do so, we rely on prior career transition literature's categorization of career decision antecedents in terms of push/anti-push, and pull/anti-pull factors (e.g., Brazier et al., 2024; Mullet et al., 2000). Specifically, push/anti-push factors relate to one's current work situation: *Push factors* are negative considerations that drive individuals to want to leave (e.g., unfavorable conditions or dissatisfaction); while *anti-push factors* are positive aspects of the current situation that retain individuals, making them hesitant to leave due to benefits or positive experiences. Next, pull/anti-pull factors relate to one's possible future work situation: *Pull factors* are positive considerations about such future that attract individuals toward making a transition (e.g., better opportunities or more favorable conditions); while *anti-pull factors* involve perceived costs and risks associated with the future situation that inhibit the decision to leave. Hence, push and pull factors both *facilitate* career transitions, while anti-push and anti-pull factors *inhibit* them. Figure 2 presents our detailed model of the boomerang mobility process.



**FIGURE 2** Antecedents, characteristics, and outcomes of boomerang transitions note. Note: Antecedents and outcomes in black are covered in previous research; those in grey are covered in previous research on an aggregated level or identified in qualitative studies; and those in grey and italics come from different literatures (e.g., repatriation) that we suggest should be covered in future research.



## Distal antecedents of the boomerang transition

As illustrated in Figure 2, distal antecedents of the boomerang transition are factors present during phase (a)—that is, before the initial exit transition when working for Organization A. There are many reasons why employees may voluntarily or involuntarily leave their organizations. These reasons have been extensively covered in turnover research (e.g., Hom et al., 2017; Rubenstein et al., 2018) and a comprehensive review is beyond the scope of this article. Many of these factors are relevant to boomerang mobility research as, often, a boomerang transition is an exit transition that was perceived as seemingly permanent and only later proved to be temporary (Klotz et al., 2021).

Distal push antecedents of boomerang transitions at the *organizational level* most prominently include perceived dissatisfaction with various aspects of the current job and work shocks (Maier, Laumer, Joseph, et al., 2021; Shipp et al., 2014). In a retrospective study by Shipp et al. (2014), individuals who made a boomerang transition reported being less dissatisfied at the time of their initial exit compared to those who did not return, even though both groups did not differ with respect to experiencing negative work shocks. Moreover, psychological contract breach when exiting from Organization A was negatively related to the intention to return to the former organization (Schärrer & Sender, 2023). Tian et al. (2022) also showed that psychological contract violation by Organization A negatively related to the intention to make a boomerang transition. Push and anti-push factors representing negative work shocks or work conditions mainly include: Organization A being acquired by another company with ethical issues (Shipp et al., 2014), disliking schedules or work conditions, layoffs, and store or department closures (Arnold et al., 2021; Snyder et al., 2021).

Distal antecedents at the *individual level* may be related to either the work or nonwork domains. Pull work domain antecedents of the initial exit transition to Organization B include mainly alternative job opportunities (e.g., a job offer or call from a headhunter; Shipp et al., 2014). Indeed, individuals who later transitioned back to Organization A repeatedly reported positive career-related reasons for their initial exit transition. Examples include the desire to pursue a career path in another organization or self-employment (e.g., Arnold et al., 2021; Snyder et al., 2021). As for nonwork reasons, prior work comparing boomerang employees to those who did not return showed that for boomerang employees specifically, a negative personal shock was often mentioned as a push factor, such as relocating because of a spouse's transfer or the need to care for a sick parent (Shipp et al., 2014).

In sum, prior research in this area has primarily focused on work shocks as organization-level push factors related to Organization A, with much less attention given to anti-push factors at Organization A. We found no studies identifying either pull or anti-pull factors related to Organization B that influenced the decision to make a boomerang transition. At the individual level, only a few studies considered work-related pull factors and nonwork-related push factors, leaving a large field of research on distal antecedents of boomerang transitions untapped.

## Proximal antecedents of the boomerang transition

Proximal antecedents of boomerang transitions may mirror the distal antecedents identified in phase (a) or be completely new factors or circumstances emerging only during phase (b). In either case, the decision to return to Organization A represents a distinct career move among various possible transitions, such as moving to a completely new Organization C. Therefore,

factors unique to phase (b) may be especially important when individuals consider a boomerang transition.

First, proximal pull antecedents of boomerang transitions at the *organizational level* include flexible working conditions, pension plans, job security, and opportunities for promotion and skill development within Organization A as motivators for rejoining a former employer (Loan-Clarke & Arnold, 2010). Further, perceptions of greater team cohesion compelled independent contractors to return to a previous organization (Schärrer & Sender, 2023). Similarly, interns showed a higher propensity to return if they maintained a strong “residual” affective commitment toward their previous organization and expected to be rehired by Organization A (Breitsohl & Ruhle, 2016). In a qualitative study, Magrizos et al. (2023) identified compensation and the prestige of Organization A as pull factors, while a hostile work environment or lack of respect were reasons not to return. In another qualitative study on drivers of IT professionals’ intention to return to a former employer, Maier, Laumer, Joseph, et al. (2021) identified job embeddedness with Organization A (i.e., perceived fit with the organization, links to others, and possible sacrifices if one had to leave their job) as a strong pull predictor to contemplate a boomerang transition, as well as job dissatisfaction and low job embeddedness at Organization B as push factors. Additional negative work shocks pushing individuals out of Organization B include fights with bosses or coworkers, dissatisfaction with pay or learning opportunities, layoffs, mergers and acquisitions, and unethical behavior at Organization B (Maier, Laumer, Joseph, et al., 2021).

Second, *individual-level* pull proximal antecedents of boomerang transitions include the perceived quality of available job alternatives at Organization A (Breitsohl & Ruhle, 2016); while push factors include performance issues at Organization B (Maier, Laumer, Joseph, et al., 2021). The convenience of the commute may represent either a pull or anti-pull factor (Breitsohl & Ruhle, 2016; Loan-Clarke et al., 2010). Finally, in the nonwork domain personal shocks representing pull factors in favor of making a boomerang transition back to Organization A include relatives’ illness, relocation, the spouse being offered a new job, or pregnancy (Maier, Laumer, Joseph, et al., 2021).

In sum, prior research has explored the pull and anti-pull factors for Organization A, with much more limited evidence regarding the push and anti-push factors for Organization B. Moreover, very limited focus has been placed on factors at the individual level in the work and nonwork domains, leaving individual-level factors for a boomerang transition under-researched.

## PSYCHOLOGICAL MECHANISMS UNDERLYING THE DECISION TO MAKE A BOOMERANG TRANSITION

In addition to identifying distal and proximal antecedents of boomerang transitions at different levels, we propose several psychological mechanisms that might explain whether and how individuals decide to make a boomerang transition. In what follows, we rely on Sullivan and Al Ariss’s (2022) conservation of resources approach to suggest potential mechanisms underlying boomerang transitions. Targeting the pre-transition phase of a voluntary decision to engage in a career transition, this perspective suggests that individuals make career decisions to preserve and/or accumulate their resources: while a surplus will result in a decision to transition, a deficit is expected to have the reverse effect. This evaluation of potential gains and losses with the decision to pursue a boomerang transition may arise at different phases of the boomerang mobility process.

## Looking forward: anticipation of double career transition outcomes at organization A

Individuals may have intentionally planned to return to Organization A before their initial exit transition in phase (a); that is, they may deliberately move to Organization B with the intention of returning to Organization A, typically because they believe that this path will enable faster career progression than staying at Organization A. This first psychological mechanism thus involves comparing the current factors in Organization A in phase (a) with expected future outcomes in Organization A in phase (c). In line with the resource perspective, individuals make a strategic, *forward-looking calculation* of whether the double career transition will likely result in a resource surplus. If they decide it (very) likely will, they will be more likely to pursue the transition (Sullivan & Al Ariss, 2022). Accordingly, Shipp et al. (2014) proposed that individuals who initially plan to return when exiting Organization A might decide to transition to Organization B within the same industry to increase their career advancement opportunities upon return. Moreover, individuals whose goal is to return might have already engaged in psychological preparation for the return as part of the initial exit decision. Concretely, they may not completely sever their psychological contract but rather experience a temporary disruption (Snyder et al., 2021). Distal antecedents of the boomerang transition might then include additional factors such as the desire for career advancement with Organization B, with proximal antecedents potentially mirroring these distal antecedents and including reaching specific career milestones or promotions at Organization B, all with the ultimate aim of returning to Organization A in a “better” position.

## Looking backward: comparison of factors in organization B and organization A

As a second psychological mechanism, individuals may compare factors related to their current work and life at Organization B in phase (b) with factors related to their former work and life at Organization A in phase (a). Thus, they may retrospectively evaluate whether the exit transition from Organization A has ultimately provided them with resource gains or losses, compared with their initial expectations. This mechanism thus involves a *backward-looking* assessment of whether various facilitating (pull and push) factors, such as career opportunities or job characteristics, are actually better at Organization B than they were at Organization A. From a resource perspective, leaving Organization A may either be proven justified (when leading to the expected resource gain) or lead to significant career setbacks that may prompt individuals to consider returning to regain the lost resources. When in a resource loss situation, individuals may thus experience post-decision regret; that is, when the new position at Organization B does not meet their expectations, they will view it less favorably compared to the previous position (Lee & Sturm, 2017). In other words, the realization that “the grass is not always greener” in other places (Maier, Laumer, Weitzel, & Joseph, 2021, p. 75) may lead to a boomerang transition. The comparison mechanism thus involves a reevaluation of the distal antecedents of the boomerang transition at Organization A, such as specific work conditions, in light of the same proximal current work conditions at Organization B.



## Objective change: new situations in organization A or organization B

Third, a boomerang transition may be triggered by objective changes in either Organization A or B that present a new situation for consideration. Indeed, many career transitions may be caused by sudden career disruptions (i.e., career shocks) that significantly impact individuals' self-regulation approach (Akkermans et al., 2021, 2024). Specifically, first, *objective changes within Organization A* may occur, related to the former push and anti-push distal antecedents in phase (a) in Figure 2. Such changes might include the introduction of new HR policies, such as flexible work hours at Organization A (Loan-Clarke et al., 2010), or changes in the leadership or team (e.g., a disliked supervisor or coworker leaving the organization). Hence, former push factors may lose their influence on individuals' career decisions and turn into pull factors for a boomerang transition. Additionally, former colleagues, supervisors, or mentors (Shipp et al., 2014) may actively encourage a boomerang transition by sharing information about new job opportunities within Organization A. This can occur, for example, after leaving an interim Organization B and during the job search phase, when individuals explicitly communicate their availability through their networks (Van Hooft et al., 2021). Such developments represent new incentives to return or pull factors. Hence, from a resource perspective, positive objective changes in Organization A may make the initial push factors less influential or even turn them into pull factors, resulting in perceived resource loss from one's exit transition to Organization B. Objective changes in distal antecedents such as work conditions at Organization A would then represent a proximal antecedent of the boomerang transition.

Second, a boomerang transition may be triggered by *objective changes in Organization B*. These changes might include the disappearance of opportunities or conditions that were promised or existed at the time of the initial transition, resulting in perceived diminished resource gain from one's exit transition to Organization B. Hence, actual changes in distal pull antecedents at Organization B that prompted the initial exit transition might even turn into proximal push antecedents, prompting the boomerang transition. Examples of such factors might include a reduction in career advancement prospects, changes in leadership, or a shift in organizational culture at Organization B.

## Subjective change: new perceptions of organization A or organization B

Besides objective changes, individuals may also start to evaluate certain factors that motivated their initial exit transition differently. Hence, past push conditions at phase (a) may become proximal pull antecedents of their boomerang transition at phase (b), or vice versa, without those conditions changing objectively. To fully understand the boomerang mobility process, it is crucial to consider the changes occurring *within* the individual navigating it. Individual work or nonwork factors (e.g., burnout due to work overload, birth of a child, career plateau) might lead to changes in career goals (e.g., prioritizing family time over hierarchical progression) or identity (Sullivan & Al Ariss, 2021), which may ultimately lead to a changed perception of factors at Organizations A and/or B (e.g., flexible work schedules).

Specifically, first, individuals might engage in a *reappraisal of distal push (and anti-push) work and life factors related to Organization A* (i.e., reevaluating factors in phase (a) in Figure 2). Such a retrospective reevaluation might lead to a renewed appreciation for aspects of the former job that were previously overlooked or undervalued (Maier, Laumer, Weitzel, & Joseph, 2021). For example, an individual who previously did not care much about flexible

work practices at Organization A may come to value such practices much more after having a first child or starting volunteering activities. Similarly, individuals might re-evaluate whether the factors influencing their initial exit from Organization A were as negative as initially perceived. This reappraisal of resources before the exit transition at phase (a) could influence one's evaluation of gains and losses from this transition in phase (b), potentially increasing the likelihood of returning to a previous employer when limited gains or even losses are perceived. Such a reappraisal process may also occur after working at other intermediate organizations (C, D, or E).

Second, individuals might engage in a *subjective reappraisal of distal pull (and anti-pull) work and life factors related to Organization B* that initially attracted them to Organization B. For example, an initially appealing factor such as a high salary at Organization B might lose its allure if the individual now places a higher value on work-life balance, which might be lacking at Organization B. Conversely, elements that were initially deemed less important, such as professional development opportunities, might gain significance over time, influencing the individual's satisfaction with the current role.

## CHARACTERISTICS OF THE BOOMERANG TRANSITION

While previous research has identified several key antecedents of the decision to engage in a boomerang transition, it has largely neglected the specific characteristics of the boomerang transition itself. Career transitions may be different across time and career stages (Akkermans et al., 2024); involve different dimensions, such as a transition to the same job, team, department, or geographical location (Sullivan & Al Ariss, 2022); and encompass psychological, physical, behavioral, and relational movements (George et al., 2022). Building on these insights, we propose three unique characteristics of boomerang transitions—temporal gap, similarity, and familiarity—that may moderate the relationships between antecedents and outcomes.

### Temporal gap

The *temporal gap* represents the time elapsed between the events of the initial exit and the boomerang transition. According to prior studies, such duration may vary significantly, from a few months to up to nine years (e.g., Maier, Laumer, Weitzel, & Joseph, 2021); with average temporal gaps of 1.75 years (Arnold et al., 2021), 2.81 years (Keller et al., 2021), 3.71 years (Swider et al., 2017), and up to 5 years (Snyder et al., 2021). Swider et al. (2017) observed that with longer time away, individuals tended to forget intraorganizational knowledge and skills, diminishing their positive impact on performance after returning (although the rate of decline slowed over time). The temporal gap may thus moderate the relationship between antecedents and outcomes of the boomerang transition. For example, individuals who initially exited Organization A due to pull factors such as career advancement goals might use a longer temporal gap to achieve those goals, enabling them to return to Organization A at a higher hierarchical position. Conversely, push factors such as layoffs might have ongoing negative repercussions if the individual returns after a shorter temporal gap, potentially leading to lower work engagement due to issues like work overload for those who remained. At the individual level, a longer temporal gap might help stabilize personal circumstances, such as caregiving responsibilities that led to the initial exit, resulting in a better work-life balance and improved psychological health upon return.

## Similarity

As another characteristic of boomerang transitions, *similarity* represents the degree to which factors at Organization A after the boomerang transition equal those before the exit transition. Concretely, similarity may refer to the physical movements (e.g., changes in the spaces and artifacts one can access to perform role-related tasks or actions) and behavioral movements (e.g., changes to the actions performed in a role) identified by George et al. (2022). The level of similarity upon returning to Organization A may differ to a large degree and is likely to play a crucial role in the outcomes of boomerang transitions. For example, returning to a known physical workspace can minimize the adjustment period and foster a quicker return to peak performance, as known surroundings reduce cognitive and emotional strain (Elsbach & Pratt, 2007). This advantage is illustrated by the positive experiences of athletes performing in the same arena as before their exit, suggesting that well-known physical spaces can boost performance (Swider et al., 2017). Arnold et al. (2021) further suggested that boomerang employees tend to have more comprehensive cognitive schemas, allowing them to process job-related information in Organization A more effectively compared to new hires. Thus, a higher degree of similarity between past and current job roles might facilitate a smoother reintegration and yield positive outcomes for both the organization and the individual—assuming the individual's initial exit was due to pull factors at Organization B. However, while it seems intuitive to assume that similarity is inherently beneficial, this will likely not be the case when an individual's initial exit was due to push factors in Organization A that remain similar upon return. The similarity of tasks may moderate the relationship between push factors and boomerang transition outcomes. For example, if an individual initially exited Organization A due to the nature of their tasks, returning to a job with similar tasks may result in (more) negative outcomes such as low work engagement or low career decision self-efficacy.

## Familiarity

Lastly, *familiarity* is the degree to which a person recognizes or is acquainted with Organization A after the boomerang transition through previous exposure or experience. Hence, whereas similarity refers to the objective elements of the organization, familiarity represents the subjective interpretation by the worker, which is not necessarily the same. Concretely, such familiarity may refer to relational movements (e.g., changes to one's position within a relational network structure) and psychological movements (e.g., changes to one's subjective identification, identity, or self-evaluation vis-à-vis a held role) identified by George et al. (2022). Regarding familiarity with relational elements, prior work experience at an organization can grant greater familiarity with the organization's social system (Keller et al., 2021)—that is, with its people, processes, and policies (Maier, Laumer, Joseph, et al., 2021). It enhances alignment with organizational needs and enables individuals to apply externally acquired knowledge for the benefit of the organization (Wang & Cotton, 2025). For example, while Swider et al. (2017) did not find that having a different leader predicted professional basketball players' performance upon return, healthcare workers who returned to work for the same manager outperformed those who returned to another manager (Keller et al., 2021). Familiarity with the social environment at Organization A might moderate the relationship between push factors, such as shut-downs or layoffs, and individuals' commitment upon their return because a deeper understanding of the organization's the social structure and support systems may help mitigate

the negative effects of such disruptions. However, as a contrary example, familiarity with team members after a boomerang transition might also hinder career advancement or innovative behavior if the returning individual follows the same team routines as before the initial exit.

## Interplay between boomerang transition characteristics

While these three characteristics of boomerang transitions may uniquely impact how these transitions unfold and how successful they may be, they are likely related to each other in meaningful ways (George et al., 2022). For example, the temporal gap served as a predictor of turnover for boomerang employees in a prior study, with those who ultimately left Organization A again having a shorter temporal gap between initial exit and boomerang transition compared to those who stayed (Booth-LeDoux et al., 2019). Here, a short temporal gap may not have permitted substantial organizational changes in a job role. Consequently, if the role remains similar, the unresolved push factors that caused the initial exit might persist, leading to repeated turnover. Also, while a longer temporal gap might typically lead to less favorable outcomes due to potential knowledge loss, this effect might be mitigated if Organization A is highly familiar. Furthermore, similarity and familiarity might strengthen or weaken each other. If an individual returns to a similar role that requires them to show the same behavior as before their exit, but their familiarity with Organization A is now low (e.g., because the team changed or because new experiences at Organization B altered their identity), these effects may cancel each other out. Although we acknowledge that such interactions are complex and difficult to investigate empirically, they nonetheless may play a significant role in the boomerang mobility process.

## OUTCOMES OF THE BOOMERANG TRANSITION

The decision to make a boomerang transition leads to various significant outcomes for the organization and the individual (e.g., Akkermans et al., 2024; Seibert et al., 2024). We distinguish between outcomes based on whether they are more *beneficial for the organization* or *for the individual*. Most studies on boomerang employment focus on outcomes that are important to organizations, such as boomerang employees' organizational commitment, role behavior, performance, or turnover. (Note that although, for example, organizational commitment is an individual attitude measured at the individual level, having committed employees offers substantial benefits to organizations; Mercurio, 2015). However, some important insights can also be drawn from the extant boomerang employment literature regarding outcomes that are more relevant to the individual, such as compensation, job satisfaction, and work-life balance. These will be of interest to applied psychology scholars, who could complement and extend the existing organization-focused knowledge to create a more interdisciplinary and holistic understanding of boomerang mobility.

### Relevant outcomes for organizations

Regarding turnover, one study showed that boomerang health service employees demonstrated a lower tendency for repeated turnover, which might be due to a renewed appreciation for their employer (Booth-LeDoux et al., 2019). In the same vein, a qualitative study showed that IT

professionals reported higher organizational commitment after a boomerang transition, which they attributed to the realization that other organizations did not offer better prospects (Maier, Laumer, Weitzel, & Joseph, 2021). This increased commitment is further supported by findings from Snyder et al. (2021), who also observed that individuals who returned demonstrated more extra-role behaviors than their non-boomerang counterparts, indicating a deeper engagement with their roles. Grohsjean et al. (2024) found that in basketball teams, boomerang players are generally more beneficial to incumbent team members than newcomers. Moreover, Keller et al. (2021) showed that boomerang employees performed better than new hires in roles with higher relational demands. Boomerang hiring improved baseball teams' performance by leveraging team-specific human capital—players' knowledge of their colleagues' performance-relevant abilities (Wang & Cotton, 2025). Hence, these results suggest that boomerang transitions may lead to beneficial organizational outcomes.

However, other findings related to performance and turnover after a boomerang transition are more nuanced. Arnold et al. (2021) noted that while managers who returned performed similarly to both internal and external hires in the first year after the boomerang transition, the improvement over time was less pronounced for rehires compared to their peers. Additionally, individuals' performance remained constant before and after the boomerang transition, albeit slightly better for those who left for positive reasons (e.g., to develop human capital; i.e., pull factors) than for negative reasons (e.g., due to inattention to duties; i.e., push factors) (Arnold et al., 2021). In another study, individuals' performance after a boomerang transition was comparable to that of matched internal employees who had never left the firm (Snyder et al., 2021). Swider et al. (2017) even found that professional basketball players showed lower performance after a boomerang transition compared to those who stayed in the organization. Furthermore, Arnold et al. (2021) observed a higher likelihood of turnover among managers after a boomerang transition than among internal and external hires, often for reasons similar to those for their initial exit transitions. Finally, Keller et al. (2021) found that individuals faced a higher risk of termination after a boomerang transition compared to new hires, possibly due to higher expectations from hiring managers, who might have anticipated quicker adaptation due to the employee's expected greater familiarity with the organization. Lastly, a study in a professional services firm found that employees with a "boomerang mentor"—a mentor who had left and later returned—were more likely to leave (Green et al., 2025). The example of colleagues who made a boomerang transition may lower employees' perceived risk of an exit transition by demonstrating that returning to an organization is an option. Thus, hiring boomerang employees might have effects on employee retention.

In sum, prior findings on organizational outcomes are mixed. Our model of the boomerang mobility process, which includes specific mechanisms and characteristics of boomerang transitions, could help future studies reconcile these diverse results.

## Relevant outcomes for individuals

Other boomerang transition outcomes are particularly important for individuals' *subjective career success* (Seibert et al., 2024). In a qualitative study, IT professionals evaluated core job characteristics as better after returning to a former employer than when working there for the first time, resulting in higher reported job satisfaction, perceived job alternatives, and salary satisfaction (Maier, Laumer, Weitzel, & Joseph, 2021). Arnold et al. (2021) further observed that such increased satisfaction might stem from boomerang employees' more realistic job previews,



which might have helped them manage their expectations and adapt to less desirable job characteristics. This argument is echoed by Snyder et al. (2021), who showed that individuals who returned demonstrated higher levels of job satisfaction than matched employees who stayed with the same organization. These authors suggested that boomerang employees may have renegotiated the terms of their psychological contract or repaired past psychological contract violations, leading them to experience more positive outcomes compared to similar employees who never left the organization. However, there is also evidence that former colleagues are less likely to assist boomerangs than newcomers (Grohsjean et al., 2024). Finally, regarding non-work outcomes, limited qualitative evidence suggests that some individuals returning to a former organization may experience increased work-life balance after the boomerang transition (Maier, Laumer, Weitzel, & Joseph, 2021).

Additional outcomes may be indicators of *objective career success* (Seibert et al., 2024). Compensation emerges as a critical area, where individuals who return may negotiate better terms than their peers who never left the organization (Snyder et al., 2021). However, while individuals may benefit from a higher rate of pay increases after a boomerang transition compared to new hires, they may also return to lower-level roles compared to those of their peers who remained within the organization (Keller et al., 2021). Arnold et al. (2021) further showed that while employees were more likely to be promoted after a boomerang transition than those who stayed in the organization, they were less likely to be promoted in comparison with external hires.

In sum, the career advancement of individuals who left and later returned does not necessarily outpace that of individuals who never left the organization or external hires.

## INDIVIDUAL AND CONTEXTUAL FACTORS IN THE BOOMERANG MOBILITY PROCESS

Research on moderators of the boomerang mobility process is currently lacking, but whether individuals will consider making a boomerang transition will likely be influenced by both individual characteristics and contextual factors, as explored in prior career transitions literature (e.g., Akkermans et al., 2024; George et al., 2022; Sullivan & Al Ariss, 2021). Below we develop those that are the most likely to apply to the boomerang mobility process.

*Individual characteristics* may include factors such as minority status, personality, or career orientation, as well as job search self-efficacy, and job search anxiety (Van Hooft et al., 2021). As an example, individuals who experienced detrimental push factors in Organization A might be less likely to make an exit transition if their job search self-efficacy is low. Furthermore, *contextual factors*, such as cultural values, economic conditions, or technological changes, might influence the relationship between making an exit transition and the perception of pull factors at Organization A. For example, an individual may perceive better career growth opportunities at Organization A due to technological changes.

Individual and contextual factors may also moderate the relationships between proximal antecedents and the boomerang transition decision and/or the boomerang transition and its outcomes. For example, prior team embeddedness at Organization A might be more important for individuals with lower levels of openness to experience who are less likely to transition between employers frequently (Woo, 2011), or for individuals with psychological impairments such as anxiety disorders, making a boomerang transition more likely for them. Additionally, cultural values such as in-group collectivism—that is, the degree to which individuals express

pride, loyalty, and cohesiveness in their organizations or families (House et al., 2002)—might influence career success after a boomerang transition. In cultures with high in-group collectivism, returning to an organization after leaving to care for a family member might be seen as a demonstration of loyalty to both their family and Organization A, potentially resulting in higher levels of career success compared to other cultures. Finally, certain factors, such as an individual's career stage, may significantly influence the entire boomerang mobility process. An early-career individual experiencing their first exit and boomerang transition may navigate this process differently than a more experienced person at a later career stage.

## THE BOOMERANG MOBILITY PROCESS: A FUTURE RESEARCH AGENDA

This article presents a comprehensive model of the boomerang mobility process, which we conceptualized as a series of career transitions (Akkermans et al., 2024). In doing so, we added a novel individual perspective on boomerang mobility and integrated it into the existing HR perspectives. Specifically, we defined the boomerang mobility process as “a series of career transitions, starting with the exit transition from the original employer and ending with the boomerang transition when that employee returns to that original employer.” Our conceptual model of the boomerang mobility process provides future avenues for research.

Although we presented several aspects of the boomerang mobility process that have already been studied, the scope of factors addressed remains limited. This gap offers substantial opportunities to advance research by integrating theoretical perspectives from both HR and career transitions and applied psychology literature. For this reason, in Figure 2 we added a series of antecedents and consequences from such related literature, which we believe should be integrated into future boomerang mobility research.

First, job search, vocational identity, and career regret may meaningfully inform future research on the boomerang mobility process. For example, the literature on career regret may shed light on the psychological mechanisms drawing individuals back to a previous employer, as regret arises following a comparison with a perceived superior alternative outcome (Budjanovcanin et al., 2023; Lee & Sturm, 2017). As another example, the job search literature provides insights into the effectiveness of job search attitudes and strategies (Van Hooft et al., 2021) and could assist scholars in understanding how individuals navigate boomerang mobility decision processes and achieve successful outcomes.

Second, literature on HR topics such as employee retention, turnover, recruiting, organizational onboarding, expatriation—and even more importantly, repatriation—are likely to be relevant. As an example, expatriation and repatriation have been conceptualized as an integrated process (i.e., individuals perceive both steps as being interconnected; Wang, 2023) and as a source of personal and career development during which identity changes may occur (Kraimer et al., 2016). Additionally, depending on repatriation transition characteristics, outcomes relevant to both the organization and the individual (e.g., Breitenmoser et al., 2018; Chiang et al., 2018; Takeuchi, 2010) may be affected. Moreover, few studies have examined HR practices and policies as antecedents of boomerang transitions, with practices and programs for corporate alumni having the potential to increase boomerang hires (Makarius et al., 2024). Further, during the exit transition, HR practices like exit interviews can be cathartic, allowing departing employees to express their opinions and concerns (Kulik et al., 2015). Respectful treatment upon exit might foster attachment to the organization (König et al., 2022), making a

future boomerang transition more likely. In addition, more research on individuals' resignation styles during initial exit transition is warranted, as these affect managers' emotional reactions to employee resignation (Klotz & Bolino, 2016) and could thus predict future boomerang transitions. Selection processes before the boomerang transition and onboarding processes during the transition (e.g., honoring boomerang employees; see Makarius et al., 2024), might affect individual and organizational outcomes, depending on the characteristics of the transition.

In the following, we outline three specific opportunities for future scholarship on the boomerang mobility process: (1) conceptualizing boomerang transitions across multiple literatures while maintaining specificity and relevance, (2) understanding the dynamics and evolving nature of push/anti-push versus pull/anti-pull factors by examining the psychological mechanisms underlying boomerang transitions, and (3) aligning divergent organizational and individual perspectives on the success of boomerang transitions. Additionally, we discuss potential future methodological approaches to address these challenges effectively.

## Opportunity 1: Ensuring conceptual clarity

Future research needs to carve out the criteria for when career transitions can be conceptualized as boomerang transitions by focusing on several broad questions: (a) When can a career transition be classified as a boomerang transition? (b) What types of and how many interim organizational transitions can an individual make before the “boomerang” label becomes irrelevant? (c) What other types of career transitions might fit into our proposed boomerang mobility framework (as alternative “Organizations B”)?

First, establishing a clear conceptualization of what constitutes a boomerang transition – and, more broadly, a boomerang mobility process – is crucial for research accuracy. Our definition of boomerang mobility as a series of career transitions, starting with an *exit transition* from the original employer and ending with the *boomerang transition*, offers a conceptual starting point for studying this phenomenon. That said, future empirical studies could further specify the conceptual properties of boomerang mobility and boomerang transitions. For example, they could offer in-depth insights into how and when employees self-identify as, and employers consider someone, a boomerang employee, notably through qualitative research. Furthermore, scholars could investigate the boundaries of the phenomenon: How much time can pass or how many different career transitions (i.e., to Organizations C, D, E, etc.) can someone make until a move back to a previous employer is no longer “realistically” considered a boomerang transition because the temporal gap is too long, or because similarity and familiarity are minimal? In short, our article provides a definition and conceptual framework of the boomerang mobility process, and we urge researchers to empirically test, refine, and enrich it.

Second, the processes involved in boomerang mobility are likely even more complex than we discussed. For clarity reasons, we focused on the process of transitioning between Organizations A and B throughout our paper, which allowed us to concentrate on examples of organization-level factors. However, there could be additional career transitions (to Organization C, D, E, etc.) involved in the boomerang mobility process. This has implications for the decision processes portrayed in Figure 2. For instance, forward-looking and backward-looking comparison processes might involve more than two organizations, and objective and subjective changes could have occurred in all organizations. Researchers should thus be aware of how they study these transitions, for instance, by looking at an overall comparison (e.g., how much change happened across the various organizations) or more specific

comparisons (e.g., how much change happened in each organization and how these impacted each other). Such complex processes are difficult to examine empirically, yet retrospective studies or long-term panel studies could shed light on such issues in more detail.

Third, scholars need to be more consistent in defining what constitutes a boomerang transition. Career transitions such as returning to an organization after retirement or temporarily leaving the workforce following the birth of a child have been conceptualized as a boomerang transition (e.g., Shipp et al., 2014). However, while research on returning to the labor force is valuable, based on our definition, such career transitions should not be considered boomerang transitions, as they do not involve time spent in an interim organization. Career transitions that differ from “regular” employment in organizations but could still be conceptualized as boomerang transitions might include returning to Organization A after self-employment (Snyder et al., 2021), after extended research visits (Swider et al., 2017), or after completing an internship (Ali & Swart, 2024; Breitsohl & Ruhle, 2016). Additionally, the phenomenon of “serial boomerang employees,” individuals who return to an organization multiple times (e.g., Schärer & Sender, 2023), warrants further exploration. It is essential to clearly define what constitutes a boomerang transition in future research, as outcomes may vary significantly for different types.

## Opportunity 2: Understanding the dynamics of push and pull factors

The second challenge involves understanding the dynamics and the interplay between push/anti-push and pull/anti-pull factors. For instance, distal pull factors at Organization B prompting an initial exit (e.g., career advancement opportunities or higher salary) may later become proximal push factors (e.g., a promised promotion was not granted, or someone reached a salary ceiling), triggering a boomerang transition, thus illustrating dynamic changes over time. Moreover, the relative importance of factors on the organizational versus individual level should be studied. Which factors have the largest impact on individuals' decision to (not) engage in a boomerang transition? At what point does leaving Organization B (or C, D, E, etc.) and returning to Organization A become appealing enough to be implemented? In particular, more research on *configurations* of push/anti-push and pull/anti-pull factors (e.g., Maier, Laumer, Joseph, et al., 2021) would be particularly valuable, as individuals do not consider factors in isolation when making career transition decisions (Sullivan & Al Ariss, 2021).

Moreover, future research should incorporate factors that may reflect the voluntary versus involuntary nature of decisions (or degree of personal agency) for both exit and boomerang transitions. As preliminary evidence, Swider et al. (2017) found that an organization-initiated exit from Organization A was negatively related to performance after the boomerang transition, while an organization-initiated return was positively related to performance. The voluntariness of a boomerang transition might thus significantly impact the boomerang transition characteristics as well as the reintegration into Organization A. Consequently, further research is needed on the processes through which individuals can generate personal control over the boomerang transition process (e.g., through self-regulation, see Akkermans et al., 2024). Additionally, greater emphasis should be placed on contextual factors constraining individual career choices, such as cultural norms (Froidevaux, 2024), career scripts (Cappellen & Janssens, 2010), or traumatic life events (Haynie & Shepherd, 2011). The decision for a boomerang transition is likely a nuanced interplay of various factors at different levels and points in time, making this transition potentially both voluntary and involuntary rather than a uniform isolated impact of single factors.

Another avenue for future research is to examine the role of external events and shocks, thereby expanding the proposed mechanism of a strategic, forward-looking calculation of whether the mobility process will likely result in a resource surplus. The unfolding model of voluntary turnover used in several studies on boomerang mobility (Maier, Laumer, Joseph, et al., 2021; Shipp et al., 2014) focuses on work shocks, showing that people can leave their jobs for planned and unplanned reasons. The related concept of career shocks, both positive and negative—defined as deliberate career reflections triggered by external events (Akkermans et al., 2018)—might also play a crucial role in the job search process, influencing whether and how individuals start searching for employment (Akkermans et al., 2021; Van Hooft et al., 2021). To illustrate, engaging in a boomerang transition might not be a deliberate or strategic decision at all but, instead, one caused by a major disruptive event, such as a layoff at Organization B or an unexpected job opportunity in Organization A. Thus, integrating insights from the literature on job search, self-regulation, and career shocks into the scholarly debate on boomerang mobility could enhance our understanding of the career dynamics and outcomes associated with boomerang transitions (Akkermans et al., 2021).

Moreover, future research should investigate how individuals gather information about changes in Organization A by maintaining relational and psychological connections over time, such as attending networking events, particularly if they plan to return. Proactively maintaining familiarity with resources during their time away could influence the likelihood of wanting to return and the reintegration and outcomes upon returning. Previous studies have not fully considered the role of social relationships with colleagues, leaders, family, and friends, both in work and non-work contexts, in boomerang decisions. For instance, a spouse's job relocation might necessitate leaving or returning to a former employer (Maier, Laumer, Joseph, et al., 2021; Shipp et al., 2014), or a prior colleague might persuade the individual to return. Future research should also examine the impact of social networks and interactions, as reintegration after a boomerang transition might be challenging due to potential negative reactions from co-workers or supervisors (Grohsjean et al., 2024). This might include envy or jealousy due to perceived disloyalty or competition for internal resources or jobs. It would be valuable to investigate how individuals manage their expectations with actual similarity and familiarity of factors after their return, including whether unmet expectations are internalized or externalized and how individual, organizational, and contextual characteristics influence these processes. Moreover, future research might investigate how boomerang transitions affect other individuals in an organization (Green et al., 2025).

### **Opportunity 3: Aligning organizational and individual perspectives on boomerang transition success**

Future research should also address the tensions arising from the mixed findings regarding the organizational and individual perspectives on boomerang mobility. Outcomes that benefit the individual may not always benefit the organization, and vice versa. Below we thus consider both factors in alternance.

First, from an *individual perspective*, our career transition approach of boomerang mobility easily connects to career success as a central outcome (for recent reviews, see Seibert et al., 2024; Spurk et al., 2019). Interestingly, based on previous research, indicators of objective career success – often measured in terms of promotions, salary (increases), and status (Seibert et al., 2024) – of individuals who left and later returned do not seem to outpace that of



individuals who never left the organization or who transitioned to a new organization (Arnold et al., 2021; Keller et al., 2021). Future research should thus carefully consider which career transitions, or lack thereof, are compared to boomerang transitions when assessing whether they are successful for individuals. Subjective career success indicators – which typically include individuals' satisfaction with various aspects, such as personal development, meaning, and impact (Seibert et al., 2024) – also require more research to determine when boomerang transitions make sense from an individual's point of view. This further suggests potential connections with the meaningful work literature (Lysova et al., 2019). More broadly, research on boomerang mobility could focus on how these career transitions may contribute to people's career sustainability, that is, the balance between happiness, health, and productivity over time (De Vos et al., 2020). A sustainable career allows individuals to retain or increase their resources over time, aligning with the decision-making processes and resource increases or decreases in our model. Career sustainability also encompasses work and nonwork aspects, providing a relevant perspective to study the impact of boomerang mobility on individual (career) outcomes.

Second, from an *organizational perspective*, the mixed findings around boomerang employees' performance and turnover suggest that the implicit assumption that boomerangs will leverage their previous experience and relationships effectively might not always hold true; hence, a more nuanced understanding is needed. Boomerang employees are expected to be familiar with the corporate culture, policies, and practices, thus requiring less recruiting, socialization, and training than new hires (Keller et al., 2021). However, merely returning to the same department or team does not guarantee boomerang transition success from an organizational view, for instance, when the transition characteristics we discussed earlier (i.e., temporal gap, similarity, and familiarity) negatively impact a boomerang's return to the organization. A potential direction, particularly for future qualitative research, is thus to explore how hiring managers or supervisors perceive boomerang mobility and how they support (or not) boomerang workers returning to their organization. Furthermore, from a quantitative perspective, thoroughly examining how antecedents, mediators, and moderators impact boomerang transition outcomes could further reveal when this type of career transition leads to favorable results.

## Methodological approaches

We recognize that empirically studying these complex multi-organization and long-term processes presents a significant challenge. Collecting data on multiple career transitions over several years, ideally from both individuals and organizations, is undoubtedly ambitious. Therefore, we want to emphasize that single research studies should not necessarily incorporate all these steps and elements. Instead, we call for empirical research that can contribute to parts of our conceptual model. When enough empirical evidence about these steps is accumulated, future reviews and meta-analyses will then help reconcile and integrate such findings. To get these studies started, Table 1 summarizes a list of research questions for future research regarding each of the above challenges. We emphasize some important considerations regarding future studies' samples, designs, and measures.

First, prior research has used *samples* from diverse sectors such as athletics (Grohsjean et al., 2024; Swider et al., 2017; Wang & Cotton, 2025), professional services (Green et al., 2025; Shipp et al., 2014; Snyder et al., 2021), retail (Arnold et al., 2021), IT (Maier, Laumer, Joseph, et al., 2021; Maier, Laumer, Weitzel, & Joseph, 2021), or healthcare (Booth-LeDoux et al., 2019; Keller et al., 2021). Expanding this to include other industries and worker types, such as



**TABLE 1** Example research questions.

Opportunity	Example research questions
1. Ensuring conceptual clarity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• When do individuals identify themselves as boomerang employees?</li><li>• How do multiple interim career transitions influence the decision-making process and outcomes of boomerang transitions?</li><li>• How do career transitions shape and influence the boomerang mobility process as separate and interconnected events?</li><li>• When does the temporal gap extend and when do similarity and familiarity diminish to a point that a career transition is no longer considered a boomerang transition?</li><li>• How do other career transitions that involve returning to an organization (e.g., after retirement, birth of a child, or retirement) differ from boomerang transitions in terms of antecedents and outcomes?</li></ul>
2. Understanding the dynamics of push and pull factors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Which push and pull factors are most important for predicting boomerang transition decisions and outcomes?</li><li>• Which pull factors are most likely to become push factors, and vice versa? What are the possible underlying processes of such changes?</li><li>• How do the interplay and configuration of antecedents influence the decision-making process for a boomerang transition and its outcomes?</li><li>• What impact does the voluntariness of exit and/or boomerang transitions have on boomerang transition characteristics and outcomes?</li><li>• How do various individual characteristics and contextual factors influence individuals' boomerang transition decisions and outcomes?</li><li>• How do individuals psychologically process planned versus unplanned elements in the decision-making process for a boomerang transition?</li><li>• How do career shocks and career regret affect boomerang transition decisions and outcomes?</li><li>• Which push and pull factors are likely to subjectively change?</li><li>• How do anticipation or comparison processes leading to a boomerang transition unfold over time?</li><li>• How do social relations at work and outside of work influence decision-making and reintegration during boomerang transitions?</li><li>• How are career expectations upon returning formed, and how do (un)met expectations influence the transition process and outcomes?</li></ul>
3. Aligning perspectives on boomerang transition success	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• What antecedents or characteristics of boomerang transitions contribute to success for individuals but not organizations, and vice versa?</li><li>• How do boomerang career transition decisions and characteristics contribute to individuals' subjective and objective career success?</li><li>• How do boomerang career transitions contribute to individuals' career sustainability, e.g., in balancing work and non-work aspects over time?</li><li>• How do other types of career transitions or career stability compare to boomerang transitions regarding individual and organizational outcomes?</li></ul>

TABLE 1 (Continued)

Opportunity	Example research questions
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• How do the perceptions of hiring managers, team members, or supervisors influence the success of boomerang transitions?</li></ul>

seasonal workers and temporary workers (Magrizos et al., 2023), or volunteers (Forner et al., 2024), would enhance the understanding of how different work contexts influence boomerang transitions. While existing research on boomerang mobility has predominantly utilized data from single organizations, panel datasets with linked organizational and individual data could enable research at both levels. Importantly, scholars could use these datasets to investigate HR practices or policies as antecedents of boomerang transitions and to study their outcomes.

Second, different *study designs* may provide a more nuanced understanding of boomerang transitions, so that future research endeavors should strive for an equitable integration of qualitative and quantitative methodologies. Thus far, however, quantitative approaches have been favored with a few exceptions (e.g., Magrizos et al., 2023; Maier, Laumer, Weitzel, & Joseph, 2021). Qualitative studies are especially important for understanding the underlying psychological processes of the boomerang mobility process. Notably, collecting multiple perspectives in qualitative longitudinal designs (Vogl et al., 2018) could illuminate the interdependence of work and nonwork factors in the boomerang mobility process. Future research should also consider retrospective designs covering the entire career transition cycle, from pre-initial exit to post-return, to explore narratives, motivations, and career agency in detail. This method could identify patterns and trends, combining qualitative insights with quantitative data. Quantitative within-person designs could shed light on individual antecedents and subjective outcomes. As illustrations, Shipp et al. (2014) showed the effectiveness of retrospective studies, while Schärer and Sender (2023) highlighted the value of experimental designs. Examining non-boomerang alongside boomerang employees can yield valuable insights into antecedents and outcomes of boomerang transitions.

Third, scales for *measuring* boomerang transition intention have been developed by Maier, Laumer, Joseph, et al. (2021), Tian et al. (2022), and Breitsohl and Ruhle (2016). Integrating questions on boomerang transition intentions and behaviors into job search behavior scales could offer valuable insights, and future research should develop measures to assess similarity and familiarity as boomerang transition characteristics. Self-identification as a boomerang employee may also be interesting to include. Furthermore, panel surveys should include questions on boomerang transition reasons or characteristics, or at least provide options for indicating whether individuals have returned to a previous employer (such as in the German Socio-Economic Panel; Goebel et al., 2019), and if so, whether this transition was voluntary, planned, and how much time elapsed between leaving and returning. Such questions will not only provide comprehensive insights into boomerang mobility but also prevent boomerang employees from being mistakenly classified as new hires in non-boomerang-specific research.

## CONCLUSION

We presented a comprehensive framework for understanding the boomerang mobility process, highlighting the critical role of individual career decision-making while also integrating

organizational perspectives. Future research should explore the multifaceted interplay of individual, organizational, and contextual factors to enhance our understanding of the psychological mechanisms driving boomerang transitions and the boundary conditions affecting their outcomes. By drawing on and contributing to various disciplines, research on boomerang mobility holds the potential to facilitate meaningful cross-disciplinary exchange.

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## CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest.

## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data sharing not applicable to this article as no datasets were generated or analyzed.

## ETHICS STATEMENT

Ethics approval was not required for this study.

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## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Please note that most factors in prior studies were reported by individuals as (retrospective) perceptions. We base the distinction between organizational and individual levels on how individuals *perceive* these factors—that is, whether they view them as relevant to themselves or to the organization. As an illustration, while commitment and performance are measured at the individual level, their relevance or benefit is primarily for the organization, so they are classified as organizational factors.

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