



How STARA Awareness Enhances Employee Career Development: A Resource Conservation Perspective

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Abstract

Background: With the rapid development of smart technologies, artificial intelligence, robotics, and algorithms (STARA) bringing profound changes to individuals' career development, employees may develop concerns about their future careers, forming STARA awareness. However, the impact of STARA awareness on employees is dual-faceted. Therefore, in this context, it is crucial to explore the pathways through which STARA awareness positively influences career sustainability while mitigating its negative effects. **Methods:** We conducted a longitudinal study across several technology companies in China. At Time 1, we measured STARA awareness and demographic information, two weeks later, at Time 2, we measured learning motivation and career sustainability, finally, we obtained 350 valid questionnaires. **Results:** The results of empirical research show that: (1) STARA awareness positively affects learning motivation. (2) Learning motivation positively affects career sustainability. (3) STARA awareness positively affects career sustainability. (4) Learning motivation mediates the relationship between STARA awareness and career sustainability. **Conclusion:** Through empirical research, the mediating role of learning motivation between STARA awareness and career sustainability has been validated, providing new insights into career sustainability in the context of intelligent technologies and offering theoretical guidance for employees' future career development.

Keywords

STARA awareness; Career sustainability; Learning motivation; Conservation of resources theory

1. Introduction

With the advent of the Fourth Industrial Revolution, the rapid development and deployment of intelligent technologies are gradually replacing human labor. Scholars estimate that at least one-third of jobs will be automated in the future (Frey & Osborne, 2017). STARA have been widely applied across various industries, profoundly impacting our society, lives, and employment (Almada-Lobo, 2015; Ivanov & Webster, 2017). Faced with the introduction of STARA in the workplace, employees may develop concerns about their future career development, forming what is known as STARA awareness (Bankins et al., 2024). STARA awareness is defined as the awareness that smart technologies, artificial intelligence, robotics, and algorithms may replace an employee's current job in the future; it reflects the uncertain situation that would be harmful to employees (Brougham & Haar, 2018). Previous studies have suggested that STARA awareness can hinder employees' psychological safety, organizational commitment, work

engagement, job satisfaction, and competitive productivity (Kong et al., 2021; Ding, 2021), while increasing job burnout and turnover intentions (Mahlasela & Chinyamurindi, 2020; Li et al., 2019), thereby negatively affecting career sustainability. However, some emerging studies have begun to emphasize the positive impact of STARA awareness on employees' career development (Wang et al., 2022). For instance, research indicates that when employees can properly understand and adapt to the introduction of STARA technologies, it can have a positive psychological impact, such as enhancing their intrinsic work motivation (Liang et al., 2022). This demonstrates the dual nature of STARA awareness on employees (Ding, 2021). Therefore, it is particularly important to explore the mechanisms through which STARA awareness can enhance employees' career sustainability while mitigating its negative effects.

Based on the Conservation of Resources Theory (COR), individuals strive to protect their resources from loss, and when resources are threatened, they take action to prevent further depletion (Hobfoll, 1989). STARA awareness reflects the work-related stress and insecurity that employees experience due to concerns about being replaced by technologies such as STARA (Mahlasela & Chinyamurindi, 2020), which may lead employees to perceive a threat to their resources and motivate them to take action to prevent this from happening, thus significantly affecting career sustainability. When individuals realize that the rapid development of STARA technologies could result in the loss of career-related resources, they perceive a resource threat, which triggers coping mechanisms such as learning motivation, self-efficacy, and psychological capital (He et al., 2023). These mechanisms motivate individuals to take action to protect their existing resources or acquire new resources to promote career sustainability.

Learning motivation influences learning outcomes by driving individuals to invest resources (such as time and energy) and adopt strategic learning behaviors (Hobfoll, 2002). Strong learning motivation encourages individuals to select appropriate learning strategies (such as active learning, problem-solving, and information integration) while also increasing their commitment to and persistence in learning (Di Nocera et al., 2014). Moreover, learning motivation is closely linked to learning attitudes and emotional regulation (Harvey, 2012). The stronger the motivation, the more likely individuals are to face difficulties in learning with a positive attitude (Hobfoll, 1990). When STARA awareness induces stress and insecurity, individuals are motivated to continually invest resources to mitigate perceived resource loss, prompting them to take actions to address threats and challenges (Hobfoll, 1989).

In summary, based on the Conservation of Resources Theory, this study constructs a mediating model to explore the impact mechanism of artificial intelligence (AI) disruption awareness on employees' career sustainability. It attempts to answer questions such as "Does STARA awareness affect employees' career sustainability?" and "How does it affect (the mediating role of learning motivation)?" The contributions of this study are as follows: Firstly, this study verifies the impact of STARA awareness on career sustainability, enriching the academic understanding of the factors influencing career sustainability. Secondly, by introducing learning motivation as a mediator, this research uncovers the mediating mechanism between STARA awareness and employees' career sustainability, providing theoretical guidance for individual career management and strategies to enhance career sustainability.

2. Theoretical Framework and Hypothesis

2.1 Conservation of resources theory

The Conservation of Resources Theory (COR) posits that individuals strive to protect and accumulate resources when facing stress to ensure their survival and psychological well-being. These resources include material resources (e.g., money and tools), personal resources (e.g., time, energy, and abilities), and social resources (e.g., support systems and interpersonal relationships) (Hobfoll, 1989). Additionally, individuals experience stress when encountering threats to their resources and take action to preserve or enhance these resources to cope with uncertainty and challenges. The accumulation and effective management of resources not only help individuals manage stress but also improve their adaptability and long-term well-being (Hobfoll, 1990).

STARA awareness reflects individuals' recognition of the potential resource threats brought about by technological advancements. When individuals perceive that technological changes may lead to job loss, they experience a sense of resource loss threat, which in turn stimulates their motivation to learn new skills and knowledge. As a part of resource conservation, learning motivation drives individuals to proactively acquire new resources, thereby enhancing career sustainability.

2.2 STARA awareness, learning motivation and career sustainability

According to the Conservation of Resources Theory, individuals' perception of resource loss triggers protective

behaviors (Hobfoll, 2002), and learning new skills is an effective protective strategy. The proliferation of STARA technologies may lead individuals to recognize the risk of traditional skills gradually devaluing or becoming obsolete. This sense of threat drives individuals to acquire new resources aligned with technological changes to maintain or enhance their career competitiveness (Lingmont & Alexiou, 2020). For instance, when employees are concerned about automation technologies replacing their current jobs, they are more likely to proactively learn relevant technical skills to reduce the likelihood of being replaced. Thus, resource threats not only awaken individuals' sense of crisis but also transform it into a positive learning motivation to cope with external uncertainties. Based on this, we propose the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 1: STARA awareness has a significant positive impact on learning motivation.

Learning motivation is the intrinsic drive that motivates, guides, and sustains learning-oriented behaviors in individuals (Colquitt et al., 2000). Based on the Conservation of Resources Theory, on the one hand, learning motivation enables employees to accurately perceive the impact of technological changes on job content and processes, enhancing their technological sensitivity and adaptability (Ren & Chadee, 2017), which helps mitigate resource depletion caused by career uncertainties. On the other hand, learning motivation drives individuals to actively acquire and accumulate career-related resources (e.g., knowledge, skills, and social networks), thereby improving their adaptability and competitiveness (Rožman et al., 2023).

Career sustainability depends on an individual's ability to continually invest resources to address challenges and seize opportunities in an ever-changing career environment. When learning motivation drives individuals to continuously update their skills and expand their cognitive boundaries, it not only reduces career threats caused by resource scarcity but also enhances their irreplaceability in the workplace (Green et al., 2020). Furthermore, the learning process itself generates resource-enhancing effects, such as improved problem-solving skills, increased innovation capacity, and accumulated professional reputation. These resources collectively build a solid foundation for individuals' career development (Ng & Feldman, 2014), thereby achieving career sustainability. Based on this, we propose the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 2: Learning motivation has a significant positive impact on career sustainability.

In the context of the rapid development of STARA technologies, individuals' STARA awareness reflects their understanding of technological changes and expectations for the future work environment (Brougham, 2018). According to the Conservation of Resources Theory, when individuals perceive resource threats brought about by STARA technologies (such as the obsolescence of existing skills or the disappearance of jobs), they respond to these threats by learning new skills and knowledge to maintain or enhance their personal resource reserves (Theobald, 2021).

Learning motivation drives individuals to actively seek education and training opportunities related to STARA, enabling them to acquire new technical skills, knowledge, and professional competencies. This not only helps individuals adapt to technological changes but also enhances their career sustainability. Through continuous learning, individuals can strengthen their professional competitiveness, improve their adaptability and innovation capacity in the workplace (Ren & Chadee, 2017), and reduce career risks associated with resource shortages. Therefore, the learning motivation triggered by STARA awareness encourages individuals to actively engage in learning, thereby improving their career sustainability and enabling them to thrive in a rapidly changing professional environment. Based on this, we propose the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 3: Learning motivation will mediate the positive relationship between STARA awareness and career sustainability.

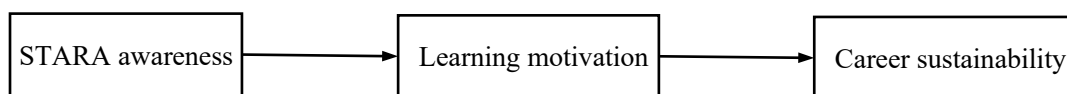


Figure 1. Hypothesized Conceptual Model.

3. Methodology

3.1 Sample and procedure

We conducted a longitudinal study across several technology companies in China, divided into two time points. Prior to the commencement of the study, we established contact with corporate management to inform them of our research objectives and significance. In return, we dispatched professional personnel to provide consulting services for the companies and to offer guidance lectures on career development for their employees. Following this, we initiated the formal research. In the survey questionnaires distributed to employees, we stated that the results of this study would be used solely for academic research, with no other commercial purposes, and we pledged to keep individual results confidential to ensure more authentic and reliable outcomes. To match data from both stages, we used employee identification numbers as codes for identification.

At Time 1, we measured STARA awareness and demographic information, collecting 376 survey questionnaires. Two weeks later, at Time 2, we measured Learning motivation and Career sustainability, collecting 359 survey questionnaires. After excluding samples with missing items and those filled out carelessly, we retained 350 questionnaires, with an overall response rate of 97%. Among the collected samples, 46% were male, and 54% were female. The age distribution was as follows: 25.7% were under 25, 25.4% were between 26 and 35, 26.6% were between 36 and 45, and 22.3% were over 46. In terms of education, 59.5% of the respondents had a bachelor's degree, and 64.6% had a work experience of 1-3 years. We validated the hypotheses proposed in this study using structural equation modeling with the Mplus 8.10 software.

3.2 Measures

STARA awareness: The scale developed by Brougham & Haar (2018) is used to measure STARA awareness. The scale consists of 4 items, with Likert seven-point scoring scale is used, where 1 means "strongly disagree" and 7 means "strongly agree". The representative item is "I think my job could be replaced by STARA" ($\alpha = .850$).

Learning motivation: The scale developed by Bezuijen et al. (2010) is used to measure learning motivation. The scale consists of 8 items, with Likert seven-point scoring scale is used, where 1 means "strongly disagree" and 7 means "strongly agree". The representative item is "I spend time planning and realizing my career." ($\alpha = .915$).

Career sustainability: The scale developed by Chin et al. (2022) was used to measure career sustainability. The scale consists of 12 items, measured via a 7-point Likert scale where a score of 1 means "strongly disagree" and a score of 7 means "strongly agree." A representative item is "My career makes me feel like I have a bright future" ($\alpha = .943$).

3.3 Results

Table 1. Results of Confirmatory Factor Analyses of Study Measures

Model	χ^2	<i>df</i>	$\Delta\chi^2/(\Delta df)$	RMSEA	CFI	TLI	SRMR
Model 1 (hypothesized three-factor model)	232.347	249	-	0.016	0.995	0.995	0.029
Model 2 (three-factor + common method factor)	224.518	246	-	0.014	0.998	0.996	0.033
Model 3 (two-factor model: combines SA and LM)	742.234	251	509.887(2)	0.075	0.897	0.887	0.094
Model 4 (two-factor model: combines LM and CS)	1704.768	251	1472.421(2)	0.129	0.697	0.666	0.165
Model 5 (one-factor model)	2176.359	252	1944.012(3)	0.148	0.598	0.560	0.175

Note: $N = 350$. SA = STARA awareness; LM = learning motivation; CS = Career sustainability; RMSEA = root mean square error of approximation; CFI = comparative fit index; TLI = Tucker-Lewis index; NFI = normative fitting index; SRMR = standardized root mean square residual.

We conducted confirmatory factor analysis on three continuous variables (see Table 1 for results). The fitting values of the proposed model (three-factor model) included the following: $\chi^2 = 232.347$, $df = 249$, RMSEA = 0.016, CFI = 0.995, TLI = 0.995, SRMR = 0.029. Compared with other models, the fitting degree of three-factor model was

better. As for the possible common method bias in this study, we applied the "Controlling for the effects of an unmeasured latent methods factor" approach (Billiet & McClelland, 2000; Schermuly & Meyer, 2016) to assess common method bias. The methods model showed a good fit [$\chi^2(583) = 224.518, p < .001$; RMSEA = 0.016; CFI = 0.998; TLI = 0.996; SRMR = 0.033]. Thus, adding the methods factor did not significantly improve the overall model fit, suggesting that the impact of common method bias was negligible.

Then, we implemented descriptive statistics and correlations analysis (see Table 2). It can be seen that STARA awareness was positively correlated with learning motivation ($r = 0.336, p < 0.01$), STARA awareness was positively correlated with career sustainability ($r = -0.347, p < 0.01$), and learning motivation was positively correlated with career sustainability ($r = 0.203, p < 0.01$). These results provided a preliminary basis for hypothesis testing.

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics and Correlations Among Study Variables

Variable	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Gender (T1)	1.540	0.499							
2. Age (T1)	2.450	1.101	-0.062						
3. Education (T1)	3.800	0.769	-0.072	0.211**					
4. Tenure (T1)	2.340	1.214	-0.138*	0.549**	0.105*				
5. STARA awareness (T1)	4.361	1.305	0.121*	-0.02	0.007	-0.096	(0.850)		
6. Learning motivation (T2)	4.470	1.211	-0.053	-0.105*	0.085	0.007	0.336**	(0.915)	
7. Career sustainability (T2)	4.382	1.243	0.064	-0.03	0.009	0.026	0.347**	0.203**	(0.943)

Note: $N = 350$. T1 = Time 1; T2 = Time 2. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$.

Finally, by constructing a structural equation model to implement path analysis (Muthén & Muthén, 2017), we verified the hypotheses using 5,000 bootstrap samples within a 95% confidence interval (see Table 3). STARA awareness had a positive effect on learning motivation (Effect = 0.361, $SE = 0.057$, CI = [0.260, 0.508]), learning motivation had a positive effect on career sustainability (Effect = 0.370, $SE = 0.063$, CI = [0.256, 0.481]), thus, hypotheses 1 and 2 are supported. STARA awareness had a positive effect on career sustainability (Effect = 0.361, $SE = 0.059$, CI = [0.232, 0.484]), the mediating effect of STARA awareness on career sustainability through learning motivation was significant (Effect = 0.270, $SE = 0.025$, CI = [0.123, 0.302]), hypothesis 3 is supported.

Table 3. Bootstrapping Results of Path Analysis

Path	Estimate	SE	95% CI
STARA awareness → Career sustainability (direct effect)	0.361	0.059	[0.232, 0.484]
STARA awareness → Learning motivation	0.380	0.053	[0.260, 0.508]
Learning motivation → Career sustainability	0.370	0.063	[0.256, 0.481]
STARA awareness → Learning motivation → Career sustainability (indirect effect)	0.270	0.025	[0.123, 0.302]

Note: $N = 350$. SE = standard error; CI = confidence interval. Bootstrap = 5,000.

4. Discussion

4.1 Conclusion

The technological transformations brought about by STARA are reshaping employees' careers, making career sustainability an increasingly important issue for organizations. Based on the Conservation of Resources Theory, this study explores the relationship between STARA awareness and career sustainability from the perspective of perceived resource loss. The findings indicate that STARA awareness positively influences employees' career sustainability through the mediating role of learning motivation. These conclusions contribute to understanding the positive impacts of intelligent technologies on employees' future career development and provide guidance for employee

behavior and career planning in the evolving professional landscape.

4.2 Theoretical implications

Firstly, this study explores the positive pathways through which STARA awareness influences employees' career sustainability, enriching the existing research on the outcomes of STARA awareness. Current research on STARA awareness primarily focuses on its relationships with variables such as burnout, organizational commitment, turnover intention, creativity, and innovation behavior (Lingmont & Alexiou, 2020), often overlooking its significant impact on employees' career development. This study further enriches research on the positive effects of STARA awareness on career sustainability and broadens the scope and theoretical perspectives of STARA awareness.

Secondly, based on the Conservation of Resources Theory, this study explains the underlying mechanisms through which STARA awareness affects employees' career sustainability from the perspective of perceived resource loss. Individuals experience stress when encountering resource threats and take action to preserve or increase these resources to cope with uncertainty and challenges. STARA awareness introduces job insecurity, prompting employees to take proactive measures to protect their existing resources. This provides a contextualized application of the Conservation of Resources Theory.

Finally, the study reveals the mediating mechanism through which STARA awareness influences career sustainability, emphasizing the explanatory role of learning motivation. By introducing learning motivation as a mediator, this study systematically explains how STARA awareness stimulates individuals' learning needs and proactive behaviors, ultimately leading to positive effects on career sustainability. This mechanism not only highlights the driving role of resource threats in shaping individual behavior but also deepens the theoretical significance of learning motivation in the context of technological change.

4.3 Practical implications

Firstly, organizations should help employees actively cope with technological changes to enhance individual career sustainability. This study reveals the impact pathways of STARA awareness on career sustainability, providing specific guidance for organizations to address technological transformations. Companies can regularly organize technical training, skill enhancement courses, and industry-focused seminars to help employees understand and adapt to technological trends. Additionally, organizations can design personalized learning plans tailored to employees' career goals and technical needs, stimulating their learning motivation. This enables employees to shift from passively responding to changes to actively embracing them, thereby improving their adaptability and competitiveness in technology-driven environments.

Secondly, organizations should optimize talent development strategies by establishing resource conservation and value-added mechanisms. To address employees' perceived resource threats caused by STARA technologies, companies can implement mechanisms that protect and enhance resources. For example, offering flexible career development paths, diversified skill training, and promotion opportunities can help employees perceive greater control over and value in their career resources. Organizations can also apply the Conservation of Resources Theory to design incentive policies, such as creating learning reward programs, providing training subsidies, or offering study leave, to stimulate employees' learning motivation and strengthen their career resource reserves, thereby fostering sustainable talent development within the organization.

Lastly, organizations should promote the construction of a lifelong learning culture to support continuous innovation. This study emphasizes the critical role of learning motivation in career sustainability, providing practical guidance for organizations to advocate lifelong learning. Companies can build learning-oriented organizations by establishing knowledge-sharing platforms and online learning resource libraries, creating convenient learning opportunities for employees. Encouraging cross-departmental collaboration and knowledge exchange can foster a culture of collective learning. By cultivating employees' learning motivation and habits over the long term, organizations can not only enhance employees' professional capabilities but also continuously inject innovative energy, maintaining a competitive edge in rapidly evolving technological and market environments.

4.4 Limitations and future research

Firstly, although this study collects data from multiple time points and employs discriminant validity testing and common method bias testing to ensure that the common method bias in the sample data is within a controllable range,

the data in this study were reported solely by employees, which may still lead to common method bias. This limitation affects the reliability of the research conclusions. Therefore, future research should consider using multiple data sources to evaluate relevant variables, which would help address common method bias at the source.

Secondly, this study examines the mediating role of employee learning motivation between STARA awareness and career sustainability, but other potential mediators were not considered. Future studies could explore additional mediating variables to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the mechanisms through which STARA awareness affects career sustainability. For example, psychological capital (such as self-efficacy, psychological resilience, optimism, etc.) could be considered as a mediator (Liu et al., 2022), to investigate whether STARA awareness influences career sustainability by enhancing employees' positive psychological states.

Finally, our research is limited to analyzing the impact mechanisms of STARA awareness at the individual level. However, studies have shown that group environments may also have unique effects on group behavior. Therefore, future research should explore a broader range of applications for STARA awareness, such as extending the research to the team level using a multilevel approach (Mao et al., 2021; Choi & Sy, 2010) to broaden the scope of STARA awareness research.

Authors' Contributions

The authors confirm their contribution to the paper as follows: Zhao Wenyu completed the theoretical construction. Liu Shan completed the method part.

Ethics Approval and Consent to Participate

Not applicable.

Human and Animal Rights

Not applicable.

Consent for Publication

Not applicable.

Standards of Reporting

STROBE and SAGER guidelines were followed.

Availability of Data and Materials

Data can be obtained from the corresponding author through reasonable request.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest, financial or otherwise.

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