Employee empowerment aims to develop and capitalize the full potential available in every employee. The idea behind employee empowerment is that employees are the ones who know best what they need to achieve the most optimal results in their work. The status quo in empowerment theory and practice is that employee empowerment is a process where managerial actions (i.e., structural empowerment) – for example, through the transfer of power and resources – affect employee reactions (i.e., psychological empowerment), which subsequently lead to multiple positive outcomes for both organization and employee (i.e., organizational performance and employee well-being). Due to these merits, scholars and practitioners in the field of management research and sciences remain highly motivated to identify factors that foster the level of employee empowerment within organizations.

However, over the last decades, work and the way work is done have changed significantly. Modern success increasingly depends on the ability of employees to operate autonomously within social networks that often span traditional organizational boundaries. While empowerment theory and practice have helped to create this new reality, this new reality has not yet been integrated into empowerment theory itself. It is to be expected, however, that this new work context significantly alters the nature of employee empowerment. For example, recent research on employee social networks has demonstrated that power and resources flow – up to a certain degree – freely through the social network of an employee. Furthermore, recent research on employee proactivity has made clear that employees are not the passive actors within organizations as is currently assumed within empowerment theory. This dissertation bridges this growing gap between empowerment theory and practice by presenting and testing a renewed perspective on employee empowerment in contemporary organizations.

A theoretical review builds the foundation of this up-to-date perspective on employee empowerment and three studies conducted within the context of the Government of the Netherlands subsequently elaborate on, and test, different elements of this perspective. The results of these studies show that employee empowerment is a process that centers on the employee, his or her proactive behaviors, social network, and
his or her level of psychological empowerment. These elements make up an ongoing empowerment process that centers on the employee and his or her specific qualities and abilities. All in all, this renewed perspective on employee empowerment better fits the reality of contemporary organizations, better connects to the rationale behind employee empowerment (the employee as the main actor), and provide simultaneously new and alternative ways for management to further empower their employees.