



Protean and boundaryless careers: An empirical exploration

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Abstract

While the constructs of protean and boundaryless careers have informed career theory for years, rigorous empirical examinations of these career models have lagged behind. This study seeks to redress this situation by constructing and developing four new scales to measure protean and boundaryless career attitudes. The scales related to protean career attitudes measure self-directed career management and values-driven predispositions. The scales related to boundaryless career attitudes measure boundaryless mindset and organizational mobility preference. The initial validation of these scales, consisting of three studies, demonstrates their reliability and validity.

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1. Introduction

The decline of the traditional organizational career requires new ways of viewing careers. Over the last decade, two new perspectives on careers have emerged and become popular in the organizational literature: the protean career and the boundaryless career. The protean career as espoused by Hall (1976) and Hall (2002) focuses on achieving

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subjective career success through self-directed vocational behavior. The boundaryless career (Arthur, 1994) focuses on crossing both objective and subjective dimensions of career at multiple levels of analysis, including organizational position, mobility, flexibility, the work environment, and the opportunity structure while at the same time de-emphasizing reliance on organizational promotions and career paths.

While the protean and boundaryless career models have been very successful in informing theory, they have prompted limited research and application because they lack operational definition by appropriate psychometric measures. This article describes the construction and initial validation of scales that measure protean career attitudes and boundaryless career attitudes. The new scales were correlated with existing measures to begin establishing their convergent validity.

1.1. The protean and boundaryless models of career

The protean career centers on Hall's, 1976, 1996, 2002 conception of psychological success resulting from individual career management, as opposed to career development by the organization. A protean career has been characterized as (Hall, 1996) involving greater mobility, a more whole-life perspective, and a developmental progression. Whether these latter dimensions relate to the protean career remains to be seen. In more recent renditions of the protean career model, Briscoe and Hall (2002) have characterized it as involving both a values-driven attitude and a self-directed attitude toward career management.

Individuals who hold protean career attitudes are intent upon using their own values (versus organizational values for example) to guide their career ("values-driven") and take an independent role in managing their vocational behavior ("self-directed"). An individual who did not hold protean attitudes would be more likely to "borrow" external standards, as opposed to internally developed ones, and be more likely to seek external direction and assistance in behavioral career management as opposed to being more proactive and independent. While most protean individuals might in fact exhibit more mobility and a learning orientation, we posit that mobility and learning may be correlates of a protean career, but not necessary components of it.

A person with a boundaryless career mindset "navigates the changing work landscape by enacting a career characterized by different levels of physical and psychological movement" (Sullivan & Arthur, current issue, p. 9). Related to the notion of psychological boundarylessness, we suggest that career actors will vary in the attitude that they hold toward initiating and pursuing work-related relationships across organizational boundaries. This does *not* necessarily imply physical nor employment mobility. Thus a person with a decidedly high "boundaryless" attitude toward working relationships across organizational boundaries is comfortable, even enthusiastic about creating and sustaining active relationships beyond organizational boundaries.

While we recognize a boundaryless career attitude that is primarily *psychological*, Arthur and Rosseau's emphasis (1996) upon careers which unfold beyond a single employment setting has frequently been interpreted as involving interfirm, *physical* employment mobility. As such, a second important boundaryless career attitude is the inclination toward physically crossing organizational boundaries in employment mobility. Someone high in such an organizational mobility attitude would be comfortable with, or even prefer a career that played out across several employers.

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