



Career self-management: Its nature, causes and consequences[☆]

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Abstract

In a recent special issue [Journal of Vocational Behavior 59 (2001) 284], scholars noted that the field of vocational psychology needs a better understanding of career self-management. This article proposes a conceptual framework of career self-management, based on Crites' [Vocational Psychology, McGraw-Hill, New York, 1969] model of vocational adjustment. It argues that people use three types of career self-managing behavior (positioning, influence, and boundary management) as adaptive responses to career development tasks. These behaviors are used to respond to or eliminate thwarting conditions or career barriers, and thereby lead to vocational adjustment. Suggested determinants of this behavior are self-efficacy, desire for control, and career anchors. Career self-management can enhance perceptions of control over the career, leading to career satisfaction, but it may also be associated with negative outcomes and maladjustment. The framework is suggested to apply both to bounded 'organizational' careers and to more flexible, improvised careers. The article concludes by considering the implications for research and practice.

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1. Introduction

These are challenging times for workers. Many commentators have argued that, in an increasingly chaotic organizational environment, workers will experience a great range and frequency of transitions during their working lives, and will need to take responsibility for charting and navigating their careers. These challenges also impact the field of vocational psychology, since globalization, technological advances and postindustrial society are suggested to be changing the very nature of the occupations and career guidance with which the field is concerned. In a recent volume of this journal (Savickas, 2001), scholars acknowledged that the field needs to take account of new types of jobs evolving from informal communications, flattened organizational hierarchies, virtual teams, and teleworking. It also needs to be able to explain how employees manage their careers strategically, how they can be adaptive and flexible throughout the career, and how they can most effectively negotiate the boundaries between work and nonwork. The field could also benefit from a greater degree of integration with other fields such as industrial/organizational (I/O) psychology.

Accordingly, this article seeks to illuminate a behavioral phenomenon that is of key importance to vocational psychology: career self-management. This is a concept that has a considerable heritage in academic writing, depicted for example in early research exploring how managers and executives progressed in large corporations (Kanter, 1977; Whyte, 1956) and more recently in I/O psychology literature on the determinants of managerial success (e.g., Judge & Bretz, 1994; Seibert, Kraimer, & Liden, 2001; Tharenou, 1997; Wayne, Liden, Graf, & Ferris, 1997). The idea of individual responsibility for career has attracted renewed attention in recent popular writing, and also in academic work exploring the effects of organizational change on careers (e.g., Sullivan, Carden, & Martin, 1998). In some recent prescriptive accounts, considerable attention is given to the ways in which individuals can and should manage their careers (Inkson, 2000; King, 2001).

Curiously, while scholars have acknowledged the importance of career self-management for vocational psychology, there have been few attempts to underpin the concept with substantive theory, or to conduct rigorous empirical investigations of it. Career self-management deserves a more scholarly consideration in vocational psychology for a number of reasons. First, most people want to believe that their careers are their own property, and efforts to shape the direction of their careers provide them with a means to assert agency in their life course (Tiedeman & Miller-Tiedeman, 1984). This is increasingly relevant given the changing nature of work: if the nature of organizational life is becoming unpredictable or even chaotic, as some commentators argue, then career self-management may be the only way to navigate through a turbulent world. Being able to understand the more complex nature of occupations and help clients manage their way through this supposed career 'pandemonium' (cf. Brousseau, Driver, Eneroth, & Larsson, 1996) is essential if vocational psychology is to retain a contemporary focus.

Second, career self-management is a kind of vocational behavior that people engage in throughout the course of their working lives, not just at the outset. The study

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