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Protean attitude and career success: The mediating role of self-management

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ABSTRACT

A protean career attitude is considered as an important determinant of career success in the contemporary career era. In this article we test a model in which we specify the relationships between protean career attitude, career self-management behaviors, career insight, and career success outcomes (career satisfaction and perceived employability). A survey was conducted among a sample of 289 employees. The results support the idea that a protean career attitude is a significant antecedent of career success and that this relationship is fully mediated by the development of career insight. The implications of these findings for understanding the process through which career attitude affects individuals' career success are discussed.

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Over the years there has been extensive writing on the changing career environment. While traditional careers tended to be defined in terms of advancement within a limited number of organizations, contemporary careers are viewed as boundaryless (Arthur, Khapova, & Wilderom, 2005). They reflect a “new deal”, in which the psychological contract between employer and employee does no longer automatically include a promise of lifetime employment and steady career advancement (e.g. Arthur & Rousseau, 1996). This new deal implies that employees have to engage in a range of career self-management activities to create career options that allow them to realize their personal career goals and ensure their employability (Hall & Moss, 1998). A changing attitude of employees toward their career development and their own role within this is needed (Briscoe & Hall, 2006).

The concept of “protean career attitude” offers a valid approach to study contemporary careers (Hall & Moss, 1998). A protean career attitude reflects the extent to which an individual manages his or her career in a proactive, self-directed way driven by personal values and evaluating career success based on subjective success criteria (Hall, 2002). Despite the fact that the protean career concept has received widespread attention in the career literature, empirical research is still in its early stages. It is assumed that a protean career attitude is associated with career success, but empirical evidence is scarce. In contrast, over the past decades a wide range of studies have addressed career competencies that are critical for career success in the new career era (e.g. Eby, Butts, & Lockwood, 2003; Kuijpers, Schyns, & Scheerens, 2006). While these studies underscore the importance of proactively managing one's career, they could gain from a stronger embeddedness in the theoretical framework offered by the protean career literature. The conceptualization of the protean career as an attitude reflecting a feeling of personal agency suggests that this attitude will engage individuals in managing their own career. This, in turn, should increase their feelings of career success. By relating the protean career attitude to the development of career insight, career self-management behaviors and career success this study responds to the need for empirical research on the predictive validity of the protean career attitude for understanding practical results (Briscoe, Hall, & DeMuth, 2006).

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1. Career success within the new career era

1.1. Career success

Within contemporary writings on careers, both objective and subjective career success receive considerable attention as important outcomes of individuals' career experiences (Arthur et al., 2005). Career success is defined as "the accomplishment of desirable work-related outcomes at any point in a person's work experiences over time" (Arthur et al., 2005, p. 179). Traditionally career researchers have focused on objective indicators of career success like organizational position or attained promotions (Arthur et al., 2005; Bozionelos, 2004). In the context of boundaryless careers, with a growing emphasis on inter-firm mobility and unpredictability, researchers increasingly speak of the personal meaning of career success as the primary focus for evaluating careers, i.e. subjective career success (Hall, 2002). Subjective career success refers to feelings of satisfaction and accomplishment regarding one's career (Seibert, Crant, & Kraimer, 1999). In this study we address career satisfaction and individuals' perceptions of employability. Career satisfaction is the most common operationalization of subjective career success (Heslin, 2005). In a context of boundaryless careers satisfaction with one's career status, rather than objective position, is viewed as the major indicator of career success (Heslin, 2005; Seibert et al., 1999). In addition to career satisfaction, in an employment context characterized by instability and uncertainty, the extent to which individuals believe to be employable in their current organization or on the external labor market is a relevant dimension of subjective career success (Bird, 1994; Eby et al., 2003; Sullivan, Carden, & Martin, 1998). We therefore address both individuals' feelings of career satisfaction and their feelings about being employable.

1.2. Protean career attitude

The protean career concept encompasses the extent to which an individual demonstrates self-directed and values-driven career orientations in their personal career management (Briscoe & Hall, 2006; Hall, 2002). Individuals with a more traditional career attitude tend to take a more passive role in managing their career and are more likely to seek for direction from the organization. Individuals with a protean career attitude experience greater responsibility for their career choices and opportunities (Hall, 1976, 2002). One important implication for the individual working in a continuously changing organizational context is that he or she must have a clear sense of personal identity that operates as an internal guide for making career decisions (Hall, 2002). Developing a protean career attitude might thus be important for individuals in order to make career choices that lead to subjective career success. As an attitude, it is conceived to set the basis for individual career management initiatives which might include both the development of learning about oneself (acquiring career insight) and taking practical initiatives to manage one's career. As shown in extant research, both career insight and self-management behaviors are important for explaining career success.

1.3. Career self-management

To realize the potential of the new career, an individual must develop new competencies related to the management of self and career (Eby et al., 2003; Hall & Moss, 1998). Inherent to the notion of protean careers is that the individual employee is the primary responsible for managing his or her career and that a strong sense of identity and values are important for guiding career decisions. (Briscoe & Hall, 1999; Briscoe & Hall, 2006; Hall, 2002). Career self-management refers to the proactivity employees show with respect to managing their careers (King, 2004; Kossek, Roberts, Fisher, & Demarr, 1998; Orpen, 1994). It includes employees' efforts to define and realize their personal career objectives, which can or cannot correspond with the organization's objectives. A review of the literature on career self-management reveals a wide range of cognitions and behaviors being studied, as well as a wide variety of terms used to label "career self-management" (e.g. proactive career behavior, individual career management, career competencies) (King, 2004; Kuijpers et al., 2006; Sturges, Guest, Conway, & Mackenzie Davey, 2002; Sturges, Guest, & Mackenzie Davey, 2000). Together these studies indicate that two components of career self-management can be discerned, i.e. a reflective and a behavioral component. While the former refers to the insights individuals develop into their own career aspirations, the latter refers to the behaviors they initiate with the aim of managing their career.

Several studies address the importance of career insight as an antecedent of career success (e.g. Arthur, Inkson, & Pringle, 1999; Defillippi & Arthur, 1994; Eby et al., 2003; Kuijpers et al., 2006). This suggests that, in addition to career self-management behaviors, it is important for individuals to develop career insight that allows them to make meaningful choices.

The behavioral component of career self-management builds on the notion of proactivity and it refers to the concrete actions (e.g. networking, self-nomination, creating opportunities) undertaken by employees to realize their career goals (King, 2004; Noe, 1996; Sturges et al., 2000; Sturges et al., 2002). These actions can focus on improvement in one's current job or on movement within or outside the company (Kossek et al., 1998; Sturges et al., 2002). Several authors have studied the relationship between career self-management behaviors enacted by individuals and career-related outcomes. These studies reveal the importance of a wide range of self-management behaviors, such as collecting information about existing or possible career opportunities, searching for feedback about one's performance and competencies, and creating career opportunities through networking and actions aimed at enhancing one's visibility (e.g. Claes & Ruiz-Quintanilla, 1998; King, 2004; Orpen, 1994; Seibert, Kraimer, & Crant, 2001; Sturges et al., 2000; Sturges et al., 2002).

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