



Vocational interests and Big Five traits as predictors of job instability

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ABSTRACT

Although empirical research on this topic is scarce, personality traits and vocational interests have repeatedly been named as potential individual level predictors of job change. Using a long-term cohort study ($N = 291$), we examined RIASEC interest profiles and Big Five personality scores at the beginning of the professional career as predictors of subsequent job changes, both internal as well as external, over the next 15 years. Overall, results provide additional evidence for an individual difference perspective on job instability, although our findings vary across instability variables. Consistent with previous research, external job changes in particular related to individual differences. Specifically, scores on Investigative, Artistic, Enterprising and Conventional scales showed to be the most important interest related predictors. With regard to Big Five personality traits, strongest associations were found with Agreeableness and Openness. In addition, facet level analyses proved to be useful to further clarify linkages between personality and job instability.

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1. Introduction

Over the past decades, research on job change widened its focus and went through some interesting evolutions. First, there was a growing interest in patterns of job mobility over a period of time, expanding the study of single turnover behaviors. Consequently, the conceptualization of job change now surpasses mere turnover behavior and is frequently labeled as job mobility, or patterns of intra- and inter-organizational transitions over the course of a person's work life (Hall, 1996; Sullivan, 1999). In addition to this broader conceptualization, there was also a shift in the way job change was valued. Specifically, the notion of job changes being intrinsically inefficient was abandoned. At the macroeconomic level, economists pointed out that job stability is not necessarily always a good thing as it can disable companies to restructure their workforce in times of structural change. Moreover, at the individual level, job change can be an opportunity to accumulate different work experiences and accordingly increase personal performance and market value. In fact, a solid body of research has shown that job shopping early in the career can be highly beneficial, resulting in greater wage gains than staying put with one employer (Bartel & Borjas, 1981).

Clearly, these evolutions in job stability research are the product of a number of factual changes in the labor market. Perhaps most perceptible are changes at the employer's side. As organizational lay-offs and restructuring are becoming more and more common now (Littler, Wiesner, & Dunford, 2003), it is not surprising that employers today no longer promote the idea of lifelong job security as a realistic employment goal. Concurrently, longitudinal studies in American as well as European employees' samples have shown that organizational commitment is declining over time (Bentein, Vandenberg, Vandenberghe, & Stinglhamber, 2005; Vandenberg & Self, 1993) and career researchers have identified a transition from organizational to boundaryless or Protean careers. These labor market evolutions are further illustrated by evidence strongly

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suggesting that job instability has markedly increased over the past decades (Bernhardt, Morris, Handcock, & Scott, 1999; White, Hill, Mills, & Smeaton, 2004).

As job instability is becoming a salient aspect in many employees' work experiences, research on this topic is necessary to help us understand how individual careers unfold. The aim of present study is to gain further insight in possible individual level determinants of job instability. In previous research, job instability has been studied from very different viewpoints. In general, two main perspectives can be distinguished (Feldman & Ng, 2007). A *structural perspective* suggests structural factors in the labor market as the main determinants of employees' mobility. Accordingly, job mobility is considered to be mainly vacancy-driven (e.g., DiPrete, De Graaf, Luijckx, Tahlin, & Blossfeld, 1997). Although important, it is not likely that these structural factors account for all variation in job mobility. After all, even in times of severe economic recession, when job vacancies are limited, employees can still be motivated to pursue job mobility options. It is clear that individuals have different preferences toward job mobility, and the possible risks or uncertainties that come with it. In an *individual difference perspective*, it is theorized that one's career is, in part, governed by internal attributes like personality traits and vocational interests (Ng, Sorensen, Eby, & Feldman, 2007). Although this perspective seems intuitively logical and although explicit hypotheses have been stated (e.g., Ng et al., 2007), empirical research on the relationships between these individual difference variables and job mobility is scarce and characterized by some important limitations. First, there has been much more research on intentions to move and attitudes toward moving than on actual change behavior (Ng, Eby, Sorensen, & Feldman, 2005). Second, very few studies have examined individual differences in actual job moves over a longer period of time. Third, although theoretically considered relevant, no studies have empirically investigated longitudinal relationships between vocational interests and the frequency of actual job changes. The aim of this study is to further expand research on job instability considered from an individual difference perspective. Using a prospective longitudinal design, both vocational interests and personality traits measured at the beginning of the career are examined as potential predictors of job instability throughout the first 15 years of the professional career, further referred to as the first career stage.

1.1. Job instability, internal mobility, and external mobility

To date, multiple types and taxonomies of job mobility exist (e.g., Nicholson & West, 1988). In this study, the focus is on the frequency of career transitions—both intra- and inter-organizational—during the first 15 years of a person's work life. As such, *job instability* in this study refers to the aggregate of three different types of moving behaviors: (1) moving to a different job within the same company, (2) moving to the same type of job with a different organization, and (3) moving to a different type of job with a different organization. In addition, we also differentiated between internal and external mobility behaviors. *Internal mobility* refers to any substantial change in work responsibilities, hierarchical level, or title within an organization. This includes internal promotions, transfers and demotions. *External mobility* refers to any change in the employing firm.

Finally, our conceptualization of job instability does not differentiate between voluntary and involuntary moving behaviors. The focus in this study is on the validity of vocational interests and personality traits in the prediction of job instability during the first 15 years of the professional career. The individual difference perspective primarily suggests that dispositional attributes affect a person's preferences for and subsequent (voluntary) behaviors associated with job mobility. However, there is evidence that individual difference variables, like personality traits, can also affect vocational life indirectly or employer-driven rather than employee-driven (De Fruyt & Mervielde, 1999). In addition, it is often very hard to determine whether and to which extent job changes are entirely voluntary. For example, employees can anticipate employer dismissal decisions by means of job change. Furthermore, job changes are often the result of joint-decision making between employer and employee (e.g., internal job changes as part of career management programs) or between an employer and his/her partner (e.g., the decision to drop out of work to take care of the children). Probably, individual difference variables like personality traits and vocational interests affect these kinds of change decisions as well; processes which cannot be tapped when only unambiguous and clear-cut voluntary job change decisions are considered.

1.2. Vocational interests and job instability

Since its origin, Holland's RIASEC theory of vocational personalities has been widely applied to vocational life (Holland, 1997). In career research, the idea of 'congruence', which states that "*people find environments reinforcing and satisfying when environmental patterns resemble their personality patterns*" (Holland, 1985, p. 53) has received most attention. Numerous studies (e.g., Assouline & Meir, 1987) have found congruence to be positively associated with job satisfaction, stability, and success.

The aim of the present study is to investigate the validity of vocational interest profiles measured at the very beginning of the career for the prediction of job instability throughout the first career stage. Holland's (1985) descriptions of the six vocational personalities do not explicitly deal with the frequency of job changes. However, these descriptions do contain some cues on the desirability and likelihood of job instability for each of the six interest types (see also Feldman & Ng, 2007).

The *Enterprising type* prefers activities that entail the manipulation of others to attain organizational goals. This type values controlling others, the opportunity to be free of control, and being ambitious. (S)he would find holding a position of power most gratifying (Holland, 1997). This ambition and need to control others could motivate Enterprising types to engage in job changes throughout the first career stage.

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