



## Exploring the path through which career adaptability increases job satisfaction and lowers job stress: The role of affect<sup>☆</sup>



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### ARTICLE INFO

#### Article history:

Received 21 May 2015

Received in revised form 25 August 2015

Accepted 26 August 2015

Available online 29 August 2015

#### Keywords:

Career adaptability

Positive affect

Negative affect

Job satisfaction

Work stress

Cross-lagged longitudinal design

### ABSTRACT

The construct of career adaptability, or the ability to successfully manage one's career development and challenges, predicts several important outcomes; however, little is known about the mechanisms contributing to its positive effects. The present study investigated the impact of career adaptability on job satisfaction and work stress, as mediated by individuals' affective states. Using a representative sample of 1671 individuals employed in Switzerland we hypothesized that, over time, career adaptability amplifies job satisfaction and attenuates work stress, through higher positive affect and lower negative affect, respectively. The data resulted from the first three waves of a longitudinal project on professional paths conducted in Switzerland. For each wave, participants completed a survey. Results of the 3-wave cross-lagged longitudinal model show that employees with higher career adaptability at Time 1 indeed experienced at Time 3 higher job satisfaction and lower work stress than those with lower career adaptability. The effect of career adaptability on job satisfaction and work stress was accounted for by negative affect: Individuals higher on career adaptability experienced less negative affect, which led to lower levels of stress and higher levels of job satisfaction, beyond previous levels of job satisfaction and work stress. Overall results support the conception of career adaptability as a self-regulatory resource that may promote a virtuous cycle in which individuals' evaluations of their resources to cope with the environment (i.e., career adaptability) shape their affective states, which in turn influence the evaluations of their job.

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Globalization is having a strong impact on the way individuals approach employment in the postmodern society (Savickas et al., 2009). Careers are becoming increasingly boundaryless (Arthur and Rousseau, 1996), a condition that requires individuals to use new resources to face the turbulence of the job market and the instability of employment. The sociologist Zygmunt Bauman (2000) used the metaphor of liquidity to describe the condition of constant change that prevents individuals from consolidating habits and procedures. Postmodern society, whose profile is difficult to define, creates insecurity, identity crisis, and chronic uncertainty. These feelings also are experienced in the workplace, prompted by words such as “downsizing,” “optimization,” “fluctuating demand,” “competition,” or “efficiency.” In this climate, the capacity to keep oneself motivated to work despite adverse conditions, and to manage the sense of uncertainty become fundamental requirements for surviving in liquid modernity. Indeed, at the end of the 20th century the World Health Organization (1993) introduced the notion of “life skills” to emphasize the psychosocial skills needed to cope

<sup>☆</sup> This publication benefited from the support of the Swiss National Centre of Competence in Research LIVES – Overcoming vulnerability: Life course perspective (<https://www.lives-nccr.ch/en/page/career-paths-n46>), which is financed by the Swiss National Science Foundation (grant no 51NF40\_125770).

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with the pressures of everyday life. These skills include analyzing and using information, managing the self, and interacting effectively with others.

In this study we investigated the role of one such skill, namely career adaptability, or the ability to successfully manage one's career development and challenges. Although career adaptability has shown to be a predictor of several important outcomes for individuals' career (e.g., Koen, Klehe, Van Vianen, Zikic, and Nauta, 2010; Zacher, 2014; Zikic and Klehe, 2006), and job attitudes (Johnston, Luciano, Maggiori, Ruch & Rossier, 2013; Ito and Brotheridge, 2005; Klehe, Zikic, Van Vianen, and De Pater, 2011; Rossier, Zecca, Stauffer, Maggiori, & Dauwalder, 2012), little is known about the mechanisms that may explain how adaptability exerts its positive effects in the workplace. We used a 3-wave cross-lagged longitudinal approach to explore affect as a mechanism through which career adaptability induces changes in job satisfaction and work stress.

## 1. Career adaptability

Vocational behavior theories have encountered deep modifications with the advent of the global economy. The assumption that career goes through a fixed sequence of stages, that individual characteristics are basically unchangeable across life, and that jobs are held lifelong in stable organizations yielded to a new conception of career construction in which vocational behavior emerges from the process of making meaning of "past memories, present experiences, and future aspirations by weaving them into a life theme that patterns the individual's work life" (Savickas, 2005, p. 43). This reconceptualization of vocational behavior emphasizes the importance of adapting to a rapidly changing environment as a fundamental resource to face the global market and to be able to design one's own life and career (Nota & Rossier, 2015). It is within this frame of reference that terms such as adaptability, lifelong learning, career self-management, and self-directedness emerged. In particular, career adaptability resources represent the combination of competences and attitudes that allow individuals to fit the environment through adaptive behaviors and make appropriate educational and career choices.

Career adaptability was defined by Savickas (1997) as "the readiness to cope with the predictable tasks of preparing for and participating in the work role and with the unpredictable adjustments prompted by changes in work and working conditions" (p. 254). In the last several years career adaptability has become a core construct in vocational counseling as a crucial aspect that supports reemployment and the choice of a profession in young people (Hirschi, 2009; Savickas et al., 2009). Adolescents higher in career adaptability show higher levels of well-being (Marcionetti & Rossier, *in press*), and are better at managing vocational transitions (e.g., Germeijs and Verschuere, 2007). Furthermore, higher career adaptability predicts reemployment quality (Zikic and Klehe, 2006), sense of power, life satisfaction, and general health (Duffy, 2010; Johnston, Maggiori, & Rossier, *in press*; Maggiori, Johnston, Krings, Massoudi, & Rossier, 2013) query.

Career adaptability is composed of four different career adapt-abilities (Savickas and Porfeli, 2012): concern, curiosity, confidence, and control. Concern refers to the commitment to making choices for the future and planning how to achieve career-related goals. Lack of career concern may lead to indifference or pessimism in envisioning future developments. Curiosity denotes an exploratory attitude toward career options and also indicates interest in the world of work. Lack of career curiosity may lead to lack of expectations regarding future employment. Confidence concerns self-efficacy beliefs regarding problem-solving and positive attitudes for overcoming obstacles. Lack of career confidence is viewed as avoidance of potentially threatening career opportunities and may lead to hampering career decisions and actions. Control refers to feeling responsible for decisions concerning career and proactive behaviors in choosing a career. Lack of career control may cause people to feel indecisive and uncertain about their future. The four subscales load on one underlying latent factor, supporting the conception of career adaptability as a unitary construct (Rossier et al., 2012). Higher scores on career adaptability are associated with higher work engagement (Rossier et al., 2012), lower work stress (Johnston et al., 2013) and better career transitions (Brown, Bimrose, Barnes, and Hughes, 2012).

Because of the influence that career adapt-abilities have on successful adaptation and, more generally on well-being, research has started to investigate the characteristics of adaptable individuals. The theoretical model recognizes adaptive personality traits, such as proactivity; adaptability resources, such as the four Cs; adapting behaviors, such as exploring, choosing, and planning; and adaptation outcomes, such as decidedness, satisfaction, and well-being. Highly adaptive individuals are better predisposed, in terms of preparation and mental readiness, to search for a job (Koen et al., 2010). They also tend to be more extraverted and conscientious (Gunkel, Schlaegel, Langella, and Peluchette, 2010). The personality characteristics of low neuroticism and high extraversion and social context beliefs were found to be significant predictors of career adaptability development in a population of 330 Swiss eighth graders (age range 12–16; Hirschi, 2009). Ito and Brotheridge (2005) found that contextual factors also may foster employees' career adaptability. In particular, they found that participating in decision-making behaviors and processes, the supervisor's career support, and autonomy in the assigned tasks fostered adaptation and work commitment. Moreover, career adaptability appears to mediate the relationship between adaptive personality and adapting behaviors in terms of work engagement (Rossier et al., 2012). Interestingly, results also showed a positive association between career adaptability and intention to leave the company, suggesting that being highly adaptable may also open up new opportunities for career development in people already employed.

## 2. The route from career adaptability to positive job attitudes

Although the positive effect of career adaptability has been demonstrated in several contexts, less is known about the mechanisms that may help individuals with strong adaptability resources to actually engage in adapting their behaviors to their work environment, which in turn lead to better adaptation outcomes. Here, we focus on two of the most studied indicators of individuals work adaptation, namely the outcomes of job satisfaction and work stress.

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