

Coping with an insecure employment environment: The differing roles of protean and boundaryless career orientations

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, we utilize a sample of working adults ($N = 362$) in the context of the recent economic recession to explore the coping mechanisms associated with different career attitudes and their subsequent impact on important individual work outcomes. Results of structural equation modeling (SEM) demonstrated that boundaryless mindset and self-directed protean career attitudes were differentially correlated with external support seeking, active coping, and identity awareness, which in turn were differentially correlated with individual work outcomes of job search behavior, performance, career success, and psychological well-being. Evidence for both full and partial mediation within the model tested is presented, as well as the potential implications of these findings and suggested avenues for future research.

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Introduction

Recently the United States and many other countries experienced the worst economic recession in several decades. In regard to workers seeking to cope with such difficult situations we propose that employees' protean and boundaryless career orientations will lead them to engage in differential coping behaviors, which will in turn have varying impacts on important work outcomes.

While protean and boundaryless perspectives have been increasingly researched in relationship to career success (De Vos & Soens, 2006) and individual differences (Briscoe, Hall, & DeMuth, 2006; Segers, Inceoglu, Vloeberghs, Bartram, & Henderickx, 2008), such studies have typically taken place in more stable and predictable circumstances. The widespread uncertainty resulting from the recessionary context in regards to employment provided a unique opportunity to study a widespread phenomenon that (due to potential increased stress levels, De Witte, 2005) tests the efficacy of protean and boundaryless career attitudes and associated coping mechanisms.

In a context in which one has so little control over the outcomes related to job stability, we explore five functional outcomes that could potentially flow from (and in spite of) periods of employment instability: job search behavior, job performance, subjective career success, and psychological well-being. In turn, we explore how these outcomes might be influenced by external relationship seeking, active coping, and identity awareness. We argue that these three career development skills are themselves driven by a protean self-directed attitude and/or boundaryless mindset. We propose that self-directed and boundaryless career attitudes lead to career behaviors that foster positive career outcomes during the economic downturns (as they have been shown to do in stable economic situations). These relationships are illustrated in Fig. 1 and discussed in detail below.

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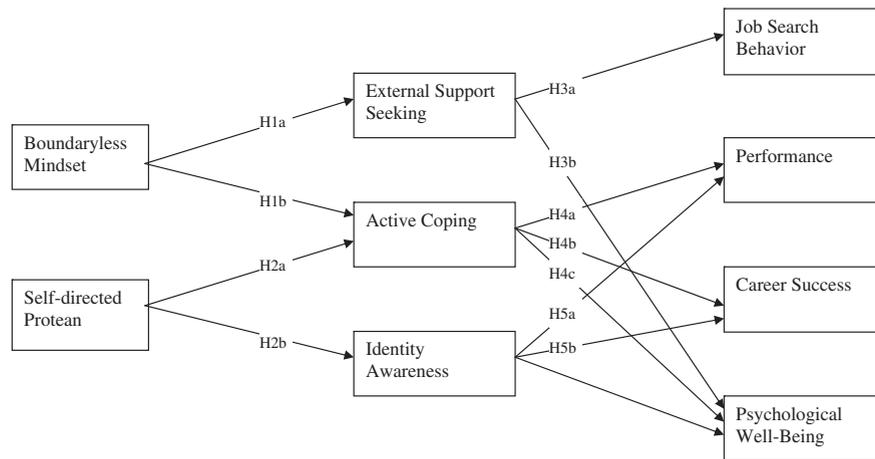


Fig. 1. Hypothesized model.

Theoretical background

Protean and boundaryless career attitudes might motivate engagement in certain career development behaviors that result in positive work outcomes, even in uncertain contexts. While careers were for many years primarily considered to be predictable paths based upon vocation and stable career management systems (Hall, 2002; Sonnenfeld, 1984) they now are thought to require a more self-managed approach to help individuals to be adaptive (Savickas, 1997).

Hall (1976) wrote about the emergence of a “protean career” in which individual career actors, not organizations, drove their careers based more upon their own psychological success and decisions than upon a structure, sequence, or set of standards imposed by the organization. Arthur (1994) defined “boundaryless” careers as those led independent of organizations, vocations and other bounded social and regulatory mechanisms. Rousseau (1995) documented a shifting psychological contract moving from a relational to a transactional and performance basis; this contract represented decreased loyalty on both sides of the employment contract. Hall’s protean concept was revived as a representation of pursuing the career on one’s own terms and the relational and “whole-life” qualities of the career were emphasized (Hall & Associates, 1996). Only more recently have these career gestalts from the 1990s become operationalized as measurable constructs (Briscoe et al., 2006; Sullivan & Baruch, 2009) and our knowledge of if and how they lead to a wider range of outcomes is limited.

Self-directed and boundaryless career attitudes’ potential to impact positive outcomes in insecure employment environments

How might protean and boundaryless attitudes influence career outcomes in employment in insecure employment situations? In relatively stressful economic conditions, the employment context is arguably a “strong” situation that might prevent (or allow) individuals from acting in ways consistent with their true preferences (Feldman & Ng, 2007). We argue that protean and boundaryless career attitudes are particularly adaptive in this context and allow individuals to continue to thrive during periods of uncertainty.

Protean attitudes have been specified (Briscoe et al., 2006) as involving self-directed career management and a “values-driven” career orientation with an emphasis upon the individual’s values driving their careers (versus organizational values for example). While Arthur (1994) originally mentioned six potential meanings of the boundaryless career Sullivan and Arthur (2006) later generalized it to comprise physical and psychological mobility.

Self-directed and boundaryless attitudes lead to related career behaviors that serve as “skills” relevant to effective career management. Skills can be considered an interaction of personal capacity and context (Fischer, 1980). Thus being self-directed or boundaryless in one context is a different skill from being self-directed or boundaryless in another. In a setting of threatened employment being self-directed or boundaryless requires one to explore alternative possibilities while at the same time maintaining competence in one’s current context.

Social, tactical and identity-related career tasks are called for in an insecure employment environment. In order to explore external opportunities, relationships are needed for both practical networking purposes as well as to provide psychosocial support (Higgins & Kram, 2001; Kahn, 1996; Kram & Hall, 1999). Coping with change (Judge, Thoresen, Pucik, & Welbourne, 1999) demonstrates the ability to function in a self-directed fashion even amidst uncertain and tumultuous environments. Finally, to preserve – while simultaneously explore career options – it is necessary for a person in an environment of low job security to be especially mindful of and explore their career identity (Fugate, Kinicki, & Ashforth, 2004; Hall, Briscoe, & Kram, 1997). Boundaryless and protean self-directed career attitudes will relate in different ways to the skills just described.

Because a boundaryless mindset involves an emphasis on exploring opportunities and relationships (Briscoe & Hall, 2006; DeFillippi & Arthur, 1996; Sullivan & Arthur, 2006), it is logical that such an orientation will predict the seeking of relationship support outside of the work setting. As the boundaryless career mindset has been strongly correlated with openness to experience

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