



# Individual difference predictors of change in career adaptability over time<sup>☆</sup>



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## ABSTRACT

Career adaptability is a psychosocial construct that reflects individuals' resources for managing career tasks and challenges. This study investigated the effects of demographic characteristics and three sets of individual difference variables (Big Five personality traits, core self-evaluations, and temporal focus) on changes over time in career adaptability and its dimensions (concern, control, curiosity, and confidence). Data came from 659 full-time employees in Australia who participated in two measurement waves six months apart. Results showed that age and future temporal focus predicted change in overall career adaptability. In addition, age, education, extraversion, neuroticism, openness to experience, core self-evaluations, and future temporal focus differentially predicted change over time in one or more of the four career adaptability dimensions. While the lagged effects found in this study were generally small, the findings suggest that certain individual difference characteristics predispose employees to experience change in career adaptability over time.

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## 1. Introduction

Career adaptability is a central construct in vocational psychology (Eggerweien, Krieshok, Ulven, & Prosser, 2004; Goodman, 1994; Hartung, Porfeli, & Vondracek, 2008; Savickas, 1997). First introduced by Super more than 30 years ago (e.g., Super & Knasel, 1981) and embedded in career construction theory (Savickas, 2002), career adaptability is a psychosocial and multi-dimensional construct that involves a combination of “attitudes, competencies, and behaviors that individuals use in fitting themselves to work that suits them” (Savickas, 2013, p. 45). Thus, career adaptability resides at the person–environment intersection and reflects individuals' resources for managing career tasks and challenges. Consistently, research has shown that career adaptability positively predicts favorable career outcomes such as graduates' employment quality (Koen, Klehe, & Van Vianen, 2012), job seekers' re-employment quality (Koen, Klehe, Van Vianen, Zikic, & Nauta, 2010), and employees' subjective career success (Zacher, 2014).

Several recent cross-sectional studies have examined relationships between individual difference characteristics and career adaptability (e.g., Creed, Fallon, & Hood, 2009; Duffy, 2010; Tolentino et al., 2014). However, hardly any research has so far examined effects of individual differences on changes in overall career adaptability and career adaptability dimensions over time. Thus, our knowledge about the extent to which certain individual differences may predispose individuals to experience increases or decreases in career adaptability over time is currently limited. A notable exception is a study by Hirschi (2009), which showed that a positive emotional disposition, perceived social support, non-immigration background, and continuing to vocational education enhanced career adaptability of Swiss high school students over one school year. Until now, however, no research has investigated predictors of change in career adaptability assessed with the recently developed and well-validated Career Adapt-Abilities Scale (CAAS; Savickas & Porfeli, 2012). The CAAS assesses four distinct career adaptability dimensions that can be combined to indicate overall career adaptability: *concern* (i.e., the extent to which individuals prepare for future career tasks),

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control (i.e., the extent to which individuals take personal responsibility in terms of influencing their development and work environment), *curiosity* (i.e., the extent to which individuals explore future possibilities), and *confidence* (i.e., the extent to which individuals believe that they can realize their career goals; Savickas & Porfeli, 2012). Tolentino et al. (2014) collected data from 108 university students in Australia at two measurement points separated by four weeks. These authors reported test–retest reliabilities between .61 and .76 for the overall CAAS score and dimension scores. Their findings suggested that career adaptability may increase or decrease over a relatively short time period. However, Tolentino et al. (2014) did not examine whether individual difference characteristics predicted change in career adaptability over time.

The goal of the current study is to contribute to the budding vocational psychology literature on career adaptability by investigating the effects of demographic characteristics and three sets of well-established individual difference variables (i.e., Big Five personality traits, core self-evaluations, and temporal focus dimensions) on changes in employees' overall career adaptability and its dimensions over a time period of six months. By using a research design with two measurement waves, this study allows a comprehensive examination of the extent to which certain individual differences prompt employees to experience increases or decreases in career adaptability over time. In the following section, I propose five sets of hypotheses on the effects of specific demographic and individual difference characteristics on changes in career adaptability and its dimensions over time.

## 2. Development of hypotheses

### 2.1. Demographic characteristics

Employee age, gender, and highest level of education achieved are demographic characteristics that are assessed in most empirical studies in the behavioral sciences. While a previous study reported gender differences in all dimensions of the CAAS except for concern (Hou, Leung, Li, Li, & Xu, 2012), and another study found relationships between age and different dimensions of the CAAS (Zacher, 2014), I do not hypothesize effects of age and gender on change in career adaptability over time due to a current lack of theoretical support for such effects. However, I propose that employees' highest level of education achieved positively predicts changes in overall career adaptability and in concern over time. Concern involves that employees prepare for upcoming career tasks and challenges (Savickas & Porfeli, 2012). Education is a form of human capital (Becker, 1975) that should help employees acquire, maintain, use, and generate resources (e.g., new knowledge and skills) in order to master these tasks and challenges. The positive effect of education on change in concern over time should further instigate a positive effect of education on change in overall career adaptability over time.

**Hypothesis 1.** Education positively predicts changes over time in (a) overall career adaptability and (b) concern.

### 2.2. Big Five personality traits

Numerous studies have used the Big Five (also called the Five-Factor Model) as a theoretical framework to examine relationships between personality traits and career development and outcomes (Ng, Eby, Sorensen, & Feldman, 2005; Seibert & Kraimer, 2001; Zacher, Biemann, Gielnik, & Frese, 2012). The Big Five traits are: extraversion (being assertive, energetic, and sociable), conscientiousness (being responsible, dependable, and orderly), neuroticism (being anxious, insecure, and depressed), agreeableness (being cooperative, trusting, and caring), and openness to experience (being imaginative, independent-minded, and autonomous; Digman, 1990). Previous cross-sectional research found positive relationships between career adaptability and extraversion, conscientiousness, agreeableness, and openness to experience, and a negative relationship between career adaptability and neuroticism (Teixeira, Bardagi, Lassance, Magalhães, & Duarte, 2012; van Vianen, Klehe, Koen, & Dries, 2012; Zacher, 2014). However, this research has not provided theoretical justifications for effects of the Big Five traits on change in career adaptability over time, and the pattern and magnitude of cross-sectional relationships might differ from the pattern and magnitude of lagged relationships due to occasion factors and background variables (Zapf, Dormann, & Frese, 1996).

In this study, I propose that conscientiousness and openness to experience, but not the other three Big Five traits, positively predict changes in overall career adaptability and several of its dimensions over time. First, conscientiousness should positively predict change over time in concern, as conscientious employees are more likely to be motivated to plan and prepare for future career tasks than their less conscientious counterparts. In addition, conscientious employees have high levels of self-discipline and need for achievement, they show effort and persistence, take personal responsibility, and solve problems successfully (Digman, 1990). These attributes, in turn, should enhance these employees' control and confidence with regard to career tasks and challenges (cf. Pouyaud, Vignoli, Dosnon, & Lallemand, 2012). The positive effects of conscientiousness on changes in concern, control, and confidence should further bring about a positive effect of conscientiousness on change in overall career adaptability over time.

Second, openness to experience should positively predict change in curiosity over time, as employees with high compared to low levels of openness to experience are more likely to mentally explore possible future career selves and opportunities, and to think and fantasize about how they might have an impact in different work roles and environments in the future (cf. Markus & Nurius, 1986; Oettingen & Mayer, 2002). The positive effect of openness to experience on change in curiosity over time should further instigate a positive effect of openness to experience on change in overall career adaptability over time. I argue that, in contrast to conscientiousness and openness to experience, extraversion, neuroticism, and agreeableness appear to have less theoretical overlap with career adaptability, and therefore I do not propose effects of these personality traits on change in career adaptability over time.

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