

## **Examining the impact of protean and boundaryless career attitudes upon psychological career success**

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### **Abstract**

*This research is aimed at approaching the relationship between boundaryless and protean career attitudes and psychological career success, within today's complex and ever changing organizational context. Drawing on a sample of 150 respondents, which enabled hypotheses testing by means of hierarchical regression analysis, the research results suggest that self-direction in managing and guiding one's career and vocational development is positively associated with psychological career success. Moreover, organizational mobility preference is negatively associated with individual's perceptions of the success of their careers and their assessment of their career development. Furthermore, this study suggests that the relationship between values-driven predispositions and psychological career success is moderated by the individual's perceived value fit with his or her employing organization, while the impact of holding a boundaryless mindset upon subjective career success is mediated by the extensiveness of internal and external networks, or the extent to which an individual develops and enhances his social capital within and beyond organizational boundaries*

**Keywords:** career attitudes; psychological career success; career satisfaction

### **1. Introduction**

Until recently, traditional career models, conceived as linear progression in one or two companies and evolving through a series of interconnected stages for climbing the organizational ladder (Levinson, 1978; Super, 1957), were the prominent paradigm in examining career development and success (Arthur & Rousseau, 1996). However, during the last decades, researchers highlighted the importance of diversifying our perspectives on careers for capturing their changing nature and bringing greater precision to research endeavors (Arthur & Rousseau, 1996; Hall, 2002). Consequently, they argue that in response to substantial changes induced by today's knowledge driven context careers become more boundaryless (Arthur & Rousseau, 1996; Defillippi & Arthur, 1994) and individuals develop protean mindsets (Hall, 2002) for successfully navigating the current business scenario.

This changing view on careers draws light on the importance of conceiving career success not only through societal and organizational lens (objective career success), but also from the intrinsic perspective of the career actor (subjective/psychological career success). The argumentation that sustains this perspective relies on the fact that opposed to the linear and upward traditional career patterns, which enabled measuring success in objective terms (number of promotions and increases in salary) (Sullivan, 1999), boundaryless career paths are more idiosyncratic, and often involve lateral or even downward career moves (Arthur & Rousseau, 1996), driven by individual's urge for continuous learning and psychological

meaningful work. From this perspective, when career success is decoupled from the accomplishments within a hierarchy, it becomes more salient to assess it as reflected in the eye of the career actor. Career literature has paid more attention to objective career success, due to the fact that traditional career patterns dominated much of the research on careers (Arthur & Rousseau, 1996; Sullivan, 1999). Moreover, when examining the determinants of subjective career success researchers identified that organizational sponsorship and stable individual differences are salient predictors of success, as approached from an individual perspective (Ng, Eby, Sorensen, & Feldman, 2005). Nevertheless, a notable gap in literature is examining the relationship between protean and boundaryless career attitudes and psychological career success. We believe this is an interesting avenue for research, due to the fact that these influences may reveal new insights and challenges for both individuals and organizations.

Thus, the aim of this article is to explore the impact of protean and boundaryless career attitudes (Briscoe, Hall, & DeMuth, 2006) upon psychological career success. The remainder of this paper is organized as follows: section 2 provides a global overview upon the theoretical framework, underlining and defining the key concepts used in this study that will further enable the formulation of the research hypotheses (Section 3). Section 4 highlights the method: the sample characteristics and data collection, and the criteria used for the measurement of the variables. Section 5 analyses the research results, and finally section 6 draws some conclusions, presents the main limitations and recommends future research lines to overcome these limitations.

## **2. Theoretical framework**

Today's dynamic and hypercompetitive business scenario has inspired researchers and practitioners to develop new conceptualizations for capturing this changing landscape. Consistent with the growing consensus on the demise of the traditional bureaucratic career (Arthur, Inkson, & Pringle, 1999; Arthur & Rousseau, 1996; Hall, 2002; Hall & Associates, 1996) two new perspectives have emerged: the boundaryless career (Arthur & Rousseau, 1996) and the protean career (Hall, 2002). The boundaryless career focuses on career enactment (Weick, 1996) and has been defined as "a sequence of job opportunities that goes beyond the boundaries of a single employment setting" (Defillippi & Arthur, 1994:307), capturing career moves crossing physical and psychological dimensions (Briscoe et al., 2006; Sullivan & Arthur, 2006). The term "protean career" emphasizes the individual perspective (Sullivan, 1999) and, more specifically, it centers on "achieving subjective career success through self-directed vocational behavior" (Briscoe et al., 2006:31). It refers to a contract with the self, rather than with the organization, as individuals take active responsibility for managing and transforming their career paths (Peiperl & Baruch, 1997). Briscoe et al. (2006) have further clarified and refined the concepts of boundaryless and protean careers, by identifying corresponding career attitudes and developing psychometric measures for assessing them. Boundaryless career attitudes encompass psychological and physical boundarylessness, whereas protean career attitudes capture self-direction in career management and making choices based on one's own values in guiding one's career and vocational development (Briscoe et al., 2006).

Career success is commonly defined as the accumulated positive work and psychological outcomes resulting from one's work experiences (Judge, Cable, Boudreau, & Bretz, 1995; Seibert, Kraimer, & Crant, 2001), and has been generally operationalized in one of two ways: objective career success and subjective or psychological career success (Ng et al., 2005). The term objective career success refers to objectively observable instrumental rewards derived

from the job or occupations, such as salary and promotions (Greenhaus, 2002; Seibert et al., 2001). Subjective career success, on the other hand, reflects individuals' perceptions of the success achieved in their careers and their assessments of their career accomplishments (Judge et al., 1995). Therefore it is dependent on the incumbent's subjective evaluation relative to his or her own career goals of expectations (Seibert et al., 2001), reflecting the importance of a person's own set of values, attitudes, and goals in judging his or her career success.

Acknowledging that in the current ever changing and dynamic organizational environment new career conceptualizations (e.g. boundaryless and protean careers) require a subjective career approach, in which individuals define and assess their own career success, various researchers have centered their endeavors on identifying the predictors of psychological career success. A recent meta-analysis (Ng et al., 2005) realized a quantitative review of the career success literature and revealed that organizational sponsorship and stable individual differences are generally more strongly related to subjective career success. Nevertheless, to date, little research has examined the impact of protean and boundaryless career attitudes upon psychological career success. In a context in which individuals are increasingly required to develop self-direction and values driven predispositions, being expected to act as enactors of change and excellent performers (Schalk & Rousseau, 2001), and to increasingly embrace mobility on its both dimensions, a consideration of the consequences of undertaking these new career paths is likely to reveal new challenges and insights for both individuals and organizations.

### **3. Hypothesized relationships**

To reiterate, a protean orientation is an individual-focused approach to career management and development, characterized by self-direction and reliance on one's personal values to guide one's career and vocational behavior (Briscoe & Hall, 2002; Briscoe et al., 2006; Hall, 2002). As derived from this definition and explicitly stated by Briscoe et al. (2006), there are two career attitudes that individuals embrace when embarking in a protean career: self-direction and values driven predispositions. Self-direction refers to an individual's self-reliance and proactive approach for managing his or her career (developing goals, searching for opportunities, taking responsibility for one's one success or failure, acquiring and developing skills and competences), instead of passively relying on the organization to provide him or her a clear career path.

In an extensive research on career self-management, King (2004) argued that taking responsibility for managing one's career development can deliver positive psychological outcomes, including career and life satisfaction, enhanced self-efficacy and individual well-being, if desired career outcomes are achieved. Wrzesniewski and Dutton (2001) highlighted the idea of career self-management, proactivity and self-reliance by means of the concept of "job crafting", conceiving individuals as creative identity builders who take opportunities to engage others in ways that change work identity and work meaning. Moreover, Seibert et al. (2001) and Crant (2000) found that individuals who have a proactive disposition achieve extrinsic career progression and internal satisfaction with their careers. Furthermore, the regulatory focus theory brings greater insight to the relationship between self-direction and career success. According to regulatory focus theory (Higgins, 1998) two kinds of goal orientation are distinguished: (1) a focus on aspirations and accomplishments (promotion focus) and (2) a focus on responsibilities and safety (prevention focus). Self-directed individuals hold a promotion focus, as they enact their careers in the quest of the fulfillment of their aspirations. When promotion-focused, people's growth and advancement needs

motivate them to try to bring themselves into alignment with their ideal selves (based on their dreams and aspirations), thereby heightening the salience of potential gains to be attained (felt presence of positive outcomes) (Higgins, 1998). We therefore expect that:

*H1a: There will be a positive relationship between self-direction in career management and psychological career success.*

Apart from holding a proactive, self-directed approach in career management, protean career actors are values-driven in pursuing meaningful career goals. These individuals are motivated to shape their careers around their values, motives, and needs, instead of borrowing external standards (e.g. outcomes determined by organizations or society) for navigating their own careers. Therefore, values-driven individuals are not inclined towards bringing themselves into alignment with their ought selves (prevention focus), but they rather strive for ideal goals, trying bring themselves into alignment with their ideal selves, that is with their dreams and aspirations, thus holding a promotion focus. Individuals with a promotion focus are striving for self-defined and autonomous values (Brockner, Higgins, & Low, 2003). This sense of reliance on one's own values, highlighting the importance of one's own needs, dreams and aspirations, is oriented towards the attainment of meaningful outcomes for the individual. This leads us to predict that:

*H1b: There will be a positive relationship between values driven predispositions and psychological career success.*

According to Sullivan and Arthur (2006:9) a boundaryless career actor “navigates the changing work landscape by enacting a career characterized by different levels of physical and psychological movement”. Drawing on this definition, Briscoe et al. (2006) highlighted two boundaryless career attitudes that make reference to both physical and psychological mobility. A boundaryless mindset is described as an opening attitude to the exterior, involving comfortableness and enthusiasm about creating and sustaining active relationships across organizational boundaries. It refers to enjoying job assignments that require working with people beyond the department or outside the organization, but also to a general attitude of feeling energized in new experiences and situations (Briscoe et al., 2006). Holding a boundaryless mindset might result in the development and enhancement of the so-called knowing-whom competencies (Arthur et al., 1999; Defillippi & Arthur, 1994), which provide access to the resources other people possess, representing a source of expertise, reputation development and learning (Arthur, 1994; Defillippi & Arthur, 1994; Parker & Arthur, 2000). Moreover, Eby, Butts and Lockwood (2003) found that knowing-whom predictors (i.e. the extensiveness of networks within and outside the organization, as well as mentoring relationships) are salient predictors of psychological career success. Based on these considerations, we expect that:

*H2a: There will be a positive relationship between holding a boundaryless mindset and psychological career success.*

The second boundaryless career attitude makes reference to the inclination of the individual towards physical mobility. In that sense, organizational mobility preference describes individual's strength of interest of remaining with a single or multiple employers. A person high on such an organizational mobility attitude “would be comfortable with or even prefer a career played out across several employers” (Briscoe et al., 2006:31). Organizational mobility is motivated by an individual's pursuit of new learning and personal growth opportunities. Inter-organizational mobility is also associated with increases in salaries (Lam & Dreher,

2004), because individuals are reluctant to change jobs unless a noticeable pay rise occurs. Many individuals, who feel unsatisfied with their level of income or internal promotion, seek out higher income levels or promotion opportunities in the external market and frequently take them when offered (Ng et al., 2005). Therefore, in spite of the fact that a high mobility preference is associated with future significant increase in psychological career success, when having a cross-sectional approach, it can be argued that individuals look for opportunities beyond organizational boundaries when they are not satisfied with their current achievements in their employing organization. We therefore expect that:

*H2b: There will be a negative relationship between organizational mobility preference and psychological career success.*

#### **4. Sample and methods**

Research data were collected using a web-based survey. The questionnaire was sent to 434 graduate and post-graduate distance learning students and after 1 week 167 surveys were submitted by the respondents, representing a response rate of 38.48%. After handling the missing data, 150 usable entries had been obtained. The respondents (57.33% women and 42.67 % men) were anonymous and they should have been working, as the questionnaire items were related to their current employment experience. The average age of the respondents was 30.92 years old. As regards the organizational size, most of them (44%) were working for small companies, whereas a significant percentage (42.66%) were employees of large companies and only a 13.34% were working in middle size companies. The average professional experience was 9.95 years, with an average organizational tenure of 5.2 years.

Protean career attitudes (self-direction in career management and values-driven predispositions) were measured using Briscoe et al. (2006)'s 8-item scale (sample item: "I am responsible for my success or failure in my career") and 6-item scale respectively (sample item: "I navigate my own career based on my personal priorities, as opposed to my employer's priorities). As far as boundaryless career attitudes are concerned, they were also assessed based on Briscoe et al. (2006)'s measures, as follows: an 8-item scale was used to assess boundaryless mindset (sample item: "I seek job assignments that allow me to learn something new") and a 5-item scale to measure organizational mobility preference (sample item: "I like the predictability that comes from working continuously for the same organization"). Psychological career success refers to individuals' feelings of accomplishment and satisfaction with their careers. In the careers literature, career satisfaction – a person's positive emotional state resulting from a personal evaluation of his or her career experiences – is commonly used as an indicator of subjective career success. Therefore, psychological career success was assessed using Greenhaus, Parasuraman and Wormley's (1990) 5-item career satisfaction scale (sample item: "I am satisfied with the success I have achieved in my career"). Information on demographic and background characteristics was collected to gain a deeper understanding of the composition of the sample. Demographic and background characteristics that were considered relevant to the present study included, age, gender, years of professional experience, organizational tenure, and total number of employing organizations.

#### **5. Data analysis and results**

Internal consistency was measured by Cronbach's Alpha coefficient and our research results support Briscoe et al. (2006)'s reported coefficients. For example, the self-directed attitudes scale revealed a smaller consistency (0.73) than that obtained by Briscoe et al. (2006) (0.81)

and contrary to our expectations, the reliability of the values-driven scale was acceptable (0.76), albeit Briscoe et al. (2006) reported less consistent results (0.69). With respect to boundaryless career attitudes, both dimensions, organizational mobility preference ( $\alpha$ : 0.745) and boundaryless mindset ( $\alpha$ : 0.845), yielded to similar internal consistencies as those reported by Briscoe et al. (2006) (namely 0.89 and 0.75 respectively). Similarly, when comparing the alpha coefficients for career satisfaction, previous research indicated an internal consistency of the scale of .88 computed using Cronbach's coefficient alpha (Greenhaus et al., 1990). In the present study, an alpha of .87 was obtained. Nevertheless, these results must be taken with caution as we have to account for the fact that this research was performed in a different country and the Spanish translation of the original scales might have produced slight changes in the interpretation of the items.

Hypothesized relationships were tested using the hierarchical regression analysis. To compute the extent of additional variance explained by study variables, the regression analysis was performed by entering the control variables (demographic variables) in step 1, and protean and boundaryless career attitudes in step 2. Importance of embracing protean and boundaryless career attitudes in explaining psychological career success can be demonstrated by examining the changes in  $R^2$  from step to step (Table 1).

Hypothesis 1a predicts that self-direction in career management is positively related psychological career success. The data analysis results presented in step 2 of Table 2 show a significant positive  $\beta$  ( $\beta=0.227$ ,  $p<0.0001$ ), suggesting that self-direction in guiding career management and vocational behavior contributes positively and significantly to an individual's subjective perceptions and feelings of his or her achieved career success. Hence, Hypothesis 1a is supported. Hypothesis 1b proposes that there is a positive relationship between values driven and psychological career success. As presented in Table 2, the  $\beta$  coefficient for values driven is negative and statistically significant ( $\beta=-0.196$ ,  $p<0.001$ ). Accordingly, the data for this study indicate that strong values-driven predispositions contribute negatively to psychological career success. Therefore, hypothesis 1b is not supported.

	M1	M2
• Intercept (Constant)	19.739***	15.999***
• Age	-.095	-0.70
• Gender	-.159	-.291
• Professional experience	.177	.138
• Organizational tenure	-.007	.006
• number of companies	-.371*	-.347*
• Self-directed		.227***
• Values-driven		-.196**
• Boundaryless mindset		.048
• Organizational mobility preference		-.173**
• Psychological career success		
$R^2$	.015	.127
$F$	1,444	3.398

Table 1: Hierarchical regression analysis results (\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*  $p < 0.001$ , \*\*\*  $p < 0.0001$ )

Hypothesis 2a states that there is a positive relationship between holding a boundaryless mindset and psychological career success. Regression results presented in Table 2 show that the  $\beta$  coefficient for boundaryless mindset is positive (as expected) but not statistically significant. Hence, hypothesis 2a is not supported. Finally, hypothesis 2b predicts a negative relationship between organizational mobility preference and an individual's current sense of psychological career success. Regression results illustrate that the  $\beta$  coefficient for

organizational mobility preference is negative and statistically significant ( $\beta=-0.173$ ,  $p<0.001$ ). Hence, hypothesis 2b is fully supported.

Furthermore, the results of hierarchical regression models presented in Table 2 show how much additional variance in psychological career success was explained by protean and boundaryless career attitudes ( $\Delta R^2=0.112$ ). Thus, the addition of career attitudes significantly explained 11.20% of psychological career success beyond what demographic variables explained.

## 6. Discussion and conclusions

This research aims at providing an insight upon the impact of holding protean and boundaryless career attitudes and individual's psychological career success, in today's dynamic ever changing environment. Despite of its increased importance, psychological career success has received limited attention from career scholars, as early research on career success focused mainly on individual's objective achievements, in terms of salary and number of promotions. Moreover, to date no research has empirically tested the relationship between protean and boundaryless career attitudes and psychological career success, albeit previous research has highlighted various predictors of subjective career success (Ng et al., 2005). The present research contributes to the career literature by providing empirical testing for four newly developed scales and assesses their performance by means of an empirical study conducted on a sample of 150 distance students attending business courses.

Research findings reveal that protean and boundaryless career attitudes are important in predicting psychological career success. More specifically, self-direction in managing one's own career and vocational development contributes positively and significantly to individuals' perceptions of the success accomplished in their careers. These findings are consistent with previous research that highlighted the importance of a self-reliant, proactive approach to career development and management (Seibert, Crant, & Kraimer, 1999; Seibert et al., 2001).

Furthermore, we have found a negative relationship between values-driven predispositions and psychological career success that leads to the rejection of the hypothesis 1b. In the theoretical framework, we predicted a positive relationship between values driven attitudes and psychological career success, drawing on the regulatory focus theory. Nevertheless, Chatman (1989) and O'Reilly et al. (1991) showed that the fit of people's values to the values of their employing organization predict individual satisfaction, commitment, turnover, and performance. This suggests that a high values driven individual is likely to achieve psychological career success when his or her values match organizational values. Thus, the values fit might act as a moderator of the relationship between values-driven and psychological career success. This relationship could be positive if individuals perceived strong values fit with their employing organization and negative if individuals did not find organizational-individual value-match. A highly protean individual is characterized by his or her desire to achieve meaningful outcomes, driven by personal strong personal values, and it is to be expected that when those individuals do not find a strong value fit with their employing organization, they are less likely to derive satisfaction when personally evaluating their career experiences. Therefore, the negative relationship between values driven predispositions and psychological career success, might be explained through the lack of value fit between individual values and organizational ones. However, this research does not focus on value-match and has not analyzed in depth this construct, although we believe that this relationship deserves closer attention. Hence, future research is encouraged for examining

the moderating effect of values-match upon the relationship between values-driven predispositions and psychological career success.

As far as boundaryless career attitudes are concerned, research results illustrate that holding a boundaryless mindset is positively associated with an individual's sense of satisfaction with the accomplishments achieved in his or her career, albeit the  $\beta$  coefficient is not statistically significant. This might be due to the fact that this relationship is mediated by the extensiveness of an individual's internal and external networks (the extent to which he or she succeeds in enhancing social capital). In that sense, the relationship between holding a boundaryless mindset and the achievement of psychological career success could be positive if an individual's approach to creating and sustaining active relationships across organizational boundaries led to the enhancement of his or her internal and external networks. The mediating role of social capital in enhancing psychological career success constitutes an interesting avenue for future research, as it could bring a greater insight into the nature of this relationship.

Finally, we have found that organizational mobility preference, that is, an individual's tendency towards physical mobility is negatively associated with psychological career success. Previous research suggested that the influence of inter-organizational mobility upon subjective career success depends whether the mobility is sought from an "approach" or "avoidance" motivation (Kondratuk, Hausdorf, Korabik, & Rosin, 2004), and in that sense voluntary mobility was found to be associated with enhanced subjective success. However, individuals are likely to change organizations or to look for employment beyond organizational boundaries when they are not satisfied with the conditions provided by the current organization or when they find a better offer in the external market.

There are several limitations of this study. First, the use of a sample of distance students attending business courses could limit the generalizability of the study findings, as the majority of the respondents were homogenous in terms of age and educational background. Therefore, future research might seek samples that are more heterogenous on these characteristics. Similarly, further research might expand the study to examine the relationship between protean and boundaryless career attitudes and work-related attitudes and behaviors (e.g. job satisfaction, organizational citizenship behavior, turnover, etc).

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