



Influence of work pressure on proactive skill development in China: The role of career networking behavior and Guanxi HRM

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ABSTRACT

This research examines how work pressure influences proactive skill development in the context of the Chinese workplace. Drawing from the conservation of resources theory, we develop a model which argues that career networking behavior serves as the mechanism that allows employees to transform work pressure into proactive skill development. We further argue that in the context of the Chinese workplace, guanxi HRM, which is a culturally-specific workplace practice deeply-rooted in Chinese tradition, plays a contingency role in influencing the extent to which work pressure influences career networking behavior. We test our model using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling for a sample of employees ($N = 392$) in China. The results show that career networking behavior positively mediates the influence of work pressure on proactive skill development and that guanxi HRM positively and significantly moderates the influence of work pressure on career networking behavior. The overall findings provide empirical support for the relevance of contextual and motivational factors in explaining employee proactive skill development. The theoretical and practical implications of the findings are fully discussed.

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1. Introduction

In today's career context characterized by rising work pressure due to overload of job demands and fast-changing role expectations (e.g. Hewlett & Luce, 2006; Parker & Liao, *in press*), employees are increasingly expected to be proactive in managing their career (De Vos, Inge, & Dewilde, 2009; Fuller & Marler, 2009; Spurk, Kauffeld, Barthauer, & Heinemann, 2015). Against this backdrop, proactive skill development and career networking behavior are the 'know how' aspects of proactive career behaviors (Taber & Blankemeyer, 2015) that have been linked to employment, career success (Forret & Dougherty, 2004) and career adaptability in an age of boundaryless careers (Savickas, 2013). Prior research on proactive career behaviors has been concerned primarily with the influence of dispositional motivational antecedents such as personality (e.g. Reed, Bruch, & Haase, 2004), self-efficacy (e.g. Hirschi, Lee, Porfeli, & Vondracek, 2013) and future work selves (e.g. Strauss, Griffin, & Parker, 2012; Taber & Blankemeyer, 2015), while overlooking important contextual factors. This oversight is a cause of concern because 'work based decisions, transitions, and experiences are rooted in interactions in a broad array of external influences' (Blustein, 2011, p. 1), which are becoming increasingly culturally-diverse (Savickas et al., 2009). Thus, there are reasons to believe that the extent to which employees respond to work pressure in relation to their career is influenced by national cultures. As such, investigating the

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role of the culturally-specific workplace practice in which proactive career behaviors are formed is of both theoretical and practical importance.

In the context of the Chinese workplace, guanxi human resource management (hereinafter guanxi HRM) is an example of culturally-specific work practices that can influence proactive career behaviors. Guanxi HRM refers to 'HRM practices (e.g., staffing, promotion, and performance appraisal) that are influenced and driven by interpersonal connections rather than rules and regulations' (Zhang, Long, Wu, & Huang, 2015, p. 699). It is an application of the indigenous Chinese guanxi culture, rooted in Confucianism, that describes personal, non-work related, connections reinforced implicitly by reciprocity and exchange of favors (Chen, Chen, & Huang, 2013). An important outcome of guanxi is increased attachment, personal-life inclusion and favorable treatment to guanxi beholders (Zhang et al., 2015). Given that guanxi is an influential philosophy that is deeply-rooted in Chinese society, it is difficult to imagine the absence of guanxi in Chinese workplaces (see Chen et al., 2013; Warner, 2011).

This study therefore contextualizes proactive career behaviors in workplaces where employees simultaneously manage work pressure and culturally-specific HRM practices. It focuses on proactive skill development as a specific form of proactive career behavior given the vital role of continuous learning and personal development for one's career (Warner, 2011; Wei, Liu, Chen, & Wu, 2010). The aim of this study is to examine how (the mechanism) and under what conditions (the context) work pressure influences proactive skill development in China. Drawing from conservation of resources (COR) theory (Hobfoll, 2001), it develops and tests a model which argues that the relationship between work pressure and proactive skill development is mediated by career networking behavior, contingent on guanxi HRM.

The study makes several contributions to the literature on proactive career behaviors. First, the study focuses specifically on proactive skill development in order to address the weaknesses of previous research (e.g. Strauss et al., 2012; Taber & Blankemeyer, 2015) that treats proactive career behaviors as a composite construct of related yet different proactivity-related behaviors (Hirschi et al., 2013; Weng & McElroy, 2010). Such conceptualization and operationalization risk leading to confounding results and is inappropriate in explaining how and why employees engage in specific behaviors, which often involve different considerations and outcomes (Strauss et al., 2012). Second, the study contributes to the small but growing research on the importance of culture as a context for understanding workplace behaviors (Blustein, 2011; Gergen, 2009; Stead, 2004). It considers the effects of the Chinese indigenous guanxi culture in the workplace by focusing specifically on guanxi HRM as a boundary condition. Lastly, greater understanding of the antecedents, mechanisms and boundary conditions of proactive skill development allows for more accurate predictions of proactive career behaviors more generally in the context of culturally-diverse workplaces.

2. Hypothesis development

2.1. Proactive skill development and conservation of resources theory

Proactive skill development refers to deliberate and self-started actions aimed at attaining learning and development in skills (Antonacopoulou, 2000; Boyce, Zaccaro, & Wisecarver, 2010) for employment and employability. The underlying assumption is that rather than passively following instructions, employees self-initiate changes in their job and situations (Frese & Fay, 2001) in relation to the development of specific skills. For example, a marketing professional can decide to up-skill his/her foreign language capabilities in order to be more efficient with foreign clients, without being required to do so by his/her employer. This is considered proactive skill development as the behavior taken to improve the specific skill set is self-starting, self-initiated and is not directed nor required by the employer.

Proactive skill development is a specific form of the broader proactive career behaviors which refer to proactivity-related behaviors in relation to broad career objectives beyond those of specific jobs (Grant & Parker, 2009; Grant, Parker & Collins, 2009). Increasingly scholars acknowledge that proactive career behaviors comprise of specific behaviors that require separate attention due to their different considerations and outcomes (Strauss et al., 2012). For instance, it includes networking aimed at facilitating resource acquisition and proactive skill development aimed at competency improvement of the self (Parker & Liao, in press). The fast-changing job demands and the continuous learning expectation have generated a surge of research on understanding the contributing factors of proactive skill development (Boyce et al., 2010; Taber & Blankemeyer, 2015).

By its very nature, proactive skill development is risky due to uncertainties involved and potential image or ego damage (Parker & Liao, in press). For this reason, it is important to understand what motivates such behavior (Strauss et al., 2012). Research to date has identified 'can do', 'reason to' and 'energized to' motivational factors that explain proactive behaviors (Hirschi et al., 2013; Parker, Bindl, & Strauss, 2010). These prior studies focus extensively on personal characteristics as predictors of proactive career behaviors, with limited empirical research on how situational characteristics like work pressure, viewed in conjunction with a motivational system, influence employees' concrete actions like career networking behavior and proactive skill development.

We draw from COR theory (Hobfoll, 1989) to explain the motivations behind employee proactive skill development. COR is a widely-used theory of motivation to explain people's behavioral and intentional responses in situations where they experience potential or actual resource depletion (Westman, Hobfoll, Chen, Davidson & Lasky, 2004). Within COR, resources refer to objects, conditions, personal characteristics, energies and any other things that people value (Hobfoll, 1989). According to Hobfoll (2001), people are motivated to create, protect, foster and nurture their social, personal, material, and energy resources so as to sustain well-being and protect against future resource loss.

The key tenets of COR theory involve both resource conservation and acquisition. The resource conservation tenet means that when people experience resource loss at work, they tend to conserve existing resources which may manifest in the form of

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