



# Proactivity, adaptability and boundaryless career attitudes: The mediating role of entrepreneurial alertness

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## ABSTRACT

We examined the role of entrepreneurialism in careers in the information society and global economy, bringing together key constructs in the fields of career studies and entrepreneurship. Specifically, our study involving a diverse group of 750 undergraduate students from Singapore showed that entrepreneurial alertness to opportunities partially mediates the relation of proactive personality to boundaryless career mindset and career adaptability, but not to self-directed or protean career attitudes. Findings are discussed in relation to the contribution of entrepreneurialism to careers research and the larger issues of workforce development.

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## 1. Introduction

Rapid globalization, technological changes, and market pressures have caused significant changes in the nature and organization of work and employment. This has resulted in a less conventional view of careers that are loosely tied to vocations and organizations, and to new paradigms for career development such as life construction (Duarte, 2009) and even life designing (Savickas et al., 2009). A new lexicon (Arthur & Rousseau, 1996) has also emerged to describe 21st century career attitudes and behaviors in terms of boundarylessness (DeFillippi & Arthur, 1994), self-directed or protean (Hall, 2002), and career metacompetencies (Hall & Moss, 1999) like career adaptability (Savickas, 1997). Recent studies suggest that workers who espouse these contemporary career attitudes and competencies may better adapt to the current work environment. Examining factors that shape such attitudes and competency are important for both theory and practice, because past studies have shown that they result in favorable outcomes such as career success (De Vos & Soens, 2008), organizational commitment (Briscoe & Finkelstein, 2009), employability (McArdle, Waters, Briscoe, & Hall, 2007), career satisfaction (Tolentino, Garcia, Restubog, Bordia, & Tang, 2013), job search effectiveness and reemployment quality (Koen, Klehe, Van Vianen, Zikic, & Nauta, 2010).

Along with this paradigm shift, scholars have also recognized the significance of entrepreneurialism in careers research. For example, elaborating on boundaryless careers, Arthur and Rousseau (1996) used the Silicon Valley, the hotbed of innovation and enterprise, to illustrate how people in that environment moved across boundaries of separate employers. They used expressions that echo entrepreneurialism such as drawing validation from outside the organization (instead of within the organization) which depicts entrepreneurial proclivity (Matsuno, Mentzer, & Özsoymer, 2002) and crafting one's career path without regard for structural constraints,

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which hints at [Stevenson and Jarillo \(1990\)](#) definition of entrepreneurship: “the pursuit of opportunities without regard for resources one currently controls” (p. 23). Moreover, [Korotov, Khapova, and Arthur \(2011\)](#) introduced the term “career entrepreneurship” as “the identification of unexploited opportunities and making of career investments in order to obtain a higher objective or subjective career reward” (p. 128). Career entrepreneurship involves acting entrepreneurially in navigating one’s career path that results in more opportunities. In becoming “*entrepreneurs of their own career*,” individuals build a portable repertoire of competencies to maintain and enhance their market value, and choose jobs fitting their personal goals as far as market conditions allow ([Hoekstra, 2011](#)).

Accordingly, scholars have argued for the crucial role of alertness to opportunities in the modern career research and practice ([Arthur & Rousseau, 1996](#); [Gunz, Evans, & Jalland, 2000](#); [Weick, 1996](#)). While career researchers have alluded to the significance of entrepreneurialism in understanding career constructs, empirical research is surprisingly lacking. In this study, we took a closer look at the relation between proactive personality and boundaryless career attitudes and adaptability, and propose alertness to opportunities (i.e., entrepreneurial alertness) as a mechanism that could account for the impact of proactive personality on career attitudes and adaptability. The value of examining entrepreneurial alertness is that it concerns the individual’s awareness, assessment and orientation toward uncertainties and changes in the external environment and context – beyond the within-person, internal issue of identity, which Hall suggested as the other meta-competency for boundaryless and/or protean careers (see also [Hall & Moss, 1999](#)). To date, however, entrepreneurial alertness have been mostly viewed and studied within the field of entrepreneurship. Integrating alertness to opportunities into the careers research would inform inquiry into understanding boundaryless career attitudes and career adaptability, as well as identifying practical ways of developing these contemporary career development outcomes.

## 2. Boundaryless and protean career attitudes and career adaptability

Since the 1990s, the field of career development has undergone a paradigmatic change with “career adaptability fast replacing “career maturity” a central construct in both research and practice ([Goodman, 1994](#); [Savickas, 1997, 2005](#)). If the focus of career development in the previous century was to help individuals to be more ready to decide on a job, occupation or vocation—a question of career maturity or readiness, today, the focus is shifting towards assessing and strengthening the individual’s psychosocial resources to manage occupational transitions, developmental tasks and work traumas (e.g., [Weigl et al., 2010](#)) and in helping individuals to think of their future careers in more boundaryless, self-directed ways which are deemed vital for career adaptability in an uncertain and changing job market (e.g., [Savickas & Porfeli, 2012](#)). In this paper, we focus on boundaryless and self-directed career attitudes and career adaptability as contemporary career development outcomes.

A boundaryless career attitude includes a boundaryless mindset (i.e., people’s psychological mobility) and organizational mobility preference (i.e., people’s physical mobility). A person with boundaryless career mindset tends to transcend organizational boundaries, which involves going beyond a single employer and a traditional career arrangement (cf. [Sullivan & Arthur, 2006](#)). Such persons enjoy working on projects with people across many organizations and feel enthusiastic about engaging in new experiences and situations outside the organization. Organizational mobility preference reflects an attitude to conduct actual moves between different occupations, jobs, and organizations, such that those with high organizational mobility preference choose to work in several different organizations and cross organizational boundaries by taking employment in another company ([DeFillippi & Arthur, 1994](#); [Sullivan & Arthur, 2006](#)).

In comparison, protean career attitude involves independence in managing one’s career and self-directed career behavior ([Briscoe, Hall, & DeMuth, 2006](#)). [Hall \(2002, 2004\)](#) suggested that protean careers are highly self-directed, flexible, adaptive, and changeable. People with protean career attitudes are values-driven as they shape their careers according to their own internal values and beliefs (in contrast to organizational values and beliefs; [Briscoe & Hall, 2006](#)). [Briscoe et al. \(2006\)](#) developed measures for boundaryless and protean career attitudes, arguing that boundaryless and self-directed protean career attitudes are related yet theoretically different constructs. However, studies that tease apart the distinction between boundaryless and self-directed protean career attitudes are surprisingly limited, to the extent that some scholars even use them interchangeably (e.g., [Harrison, 2006](#); [Inkson, 2006](#)). In this study, we address this gap by proposing different hypotheses for the two career attitudes, as we will explain more in the later sections.

Another contemporary career construct beyond attitudes is career adaptability. Career adaptability is distinguished from adaptivity traits like proactive personality, and is defined as “attitudes, competencies, and behaviors that individuals use in fitting themselves to work that suits them” ([Savickas, 2005, p. 45](#)) and “enables the individual to prepare for current and anticipated occupational changes” ([Tolentino et al., 2013, p. 411](#)). [Savickas and Porfeli \(2012\)](#) conceptualized career adaptability as a multidimensional construct comprising four self-regulatory elements: concern (involvement in preparing for one’s future career), control (ownership and responsibility to influence one’s career), curiosity (exploring possible selves and opportunities), and confidence (active career pursuit and anticipation of success in the midst of challenges). Taken together, these career-relevant attitudes (i.e., boundaryless and protean career attitudes) and psychosocial resources (i.e., career adaptability) have been identified as critical for individuals to acquire if they wish to survive the digital revolution and thrive in the work context of the global economy.

## 3. Proactive personality: A common antecedent in careers and entrepreneurship research

Proactive personality captures a behavioral tendency toward enacting, or changing, one’s environment ([Bateman & Crant, 1993](#)). Proactive individuals are those who are unconstrained by situational forces, identify opportunities and act on them, show initiative, take action to influence their environments, and persevere until meaningful change occurs; while non-proactive individuals are

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