



# Career adaptability, hope and life satisfaction in workers with intellectual disability



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## ABSTRACT

The unpredictable and unstable current work market is impacting in particular at-risk workers, such as individuals with disability. Based on Life Design approach, the present study focused on two variables, career adaptability and hope, relevant to coping with the current work context and their role in affecting life satisfaction. A partial mediational model between career adaptability and life satisfaction, through agency and pathway (hope), was tested. 120 (60 women and 60 men) adult workers with mild intellectual disability were involved. Results provided support for the model. Specifically, career adaptability indirectly, through agency and pathway, predicted life satisfaction. These results have important implications for practice and underscore the need to support workers with disability in their life design process.

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## 1. Introduction

The “World Report on Disability” estimated that more than two billions of people, 15.6% of working age people, from 15 years old, have some form of disability (WHO, 2011). According to the European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions (2010), in the next years, the amount of people with disability in many countries in the world is destined to grow and this is due both to a longer life prospect and to an increasing general clinical conditions, e.g. diabetes, vascular and mental health problems, and environmental conditions (natural disasters, wars, substance abuse, air pollution, and road accidents).

Loisel and Anema (2013) highlighted that the rate of employment in working age people with disability is about 44% compared to 75% of people without disability. Moreover, workers with disability receive lower wages than colleagues without disabilities (Martinez, 2013). In Italy, up to 34% of people with disability are included in the work market: only 0.9% are seeking work and 3.5% are employed. The percentage of individuals not working increases as severity of disability increases: for those with only one difficulty/disability, it ranges from 8.1% to 14.3%; it rises to 28.4% for people with two disability and reaches 35.5% for individuals presenting three types of difficulty (National Institute of Statistics, 2012). Among individuals with disability, those with intellectual disability have the lowest employment rate (1.5%), as compared to the other types of disability. Moreover, this situation is complicated by employers' negative attitudes, who describe them as needing of help and not socially and professionally competent people (Authors, 2013).

Even for people with intellectual disability, work may play an essential role in their career development, by favoring a more positive professional identity (Wehmeyer et al., 2011) and higher levels of life satisfaction (Baldry & Hallier, 2010). It can in fact be considered both as a place of socialization and as a tool that helps people to define their role in society, thus contributing to the development of a better self-image and, therefore, higher levels of self-esteem (Prins, 2013).

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We are living in a work market that is unpredictable and unstable, where career transitions are more complex and frequent, work paths are far less predictable than two decades ago, (Savickas et al., 2009), and in which a shift towards short-term contracts instead of lifetime occupation is occurring (Tladinyane, Coetzee, & Masenge, 2013). Moreover, recession, austerity measures and funding cuts in social services and public assistance are impacting the current socio-economic situation of most of industrialized western countries. These changes may instill feelings of discomfort and insecurity in a large proportion of the population, and in particular in some groups of people such as those with disability (Authors et al., in press).

Work settings require less delimited skills of workers and provide rewards less often, i.e., promotions, continued employment, and career advances. Contrariwise, a premium is increasingly being given to workers to adapt to the permanent needs of employers, to keep up to date and improve their skills, and to change flexibly among old and new work demands and employers. This may also produce negative effects on people's life satisfaction, who are not prepared to handle with this difficult situation, decreasing their work performance, increasing risk for health and psychological problems (Rubery, 2011), and favoring a lack of self-control, and hope, and a pessimistic view of the future (Luthans & Youssef, 2007).

At the beginning of the economic crisis that now is enveloping the Western world, an international group of scholars has given rise to the Life Design approach (LD), aimed at providing answers to the crisis (Savickas et al., 2009). LD states that career problems are only “a slice of the pie” of individual life, and that people need to understand how to handle postmodern life. It should specify skills and knowledge for the analysis of non-linear causalities, ecological settings, multiple subjective contexts, and complex dynamics. Moreover, it emphasizes the need to support people to become experts in co-construction and life design processes, to anticipate and deal with career transitions, and to consider the hope for a foreseeable future, useful to individual's future planning and behavior, and career adaptability, that is modern world workers' essential resource to manage frequent career and life transitions (Authors et al., in press; Savickas et al., 2009).

Based on LD and considering a group of workers with intellectual disability, the present study focused on two variables, career adaptability and hope, relevant to coping with the current work context and their role in affecting life satisfaction.

## 2. Career adaptability

Career adaptability is referred to a set of individual resources to cope with developmental tasks, to participate in working life and to adapt to unexpected needs related to the changes of the work market and job conditions (Savickas & Porfeli, 2012). It refers to work tasks and role transitions that people have to tackle and, therefore, the resources needed to handle them. In other words, it is the process by which people actively construct their career life, while coping with changing situations that they experience in their social contexts (Karaevli & Hall, 2006; Savickas, 2013).

Adaptability is composed by four resources, which are four problem-solving and coping strategies used by individuals to assimilate their self-concept with career roles; specifically these are (1) concern for the future, i.e. the individual ability to connect past with present and to be positively projected towards the future, (2) control, the tendency to think that the future is in part manageable and that is important not to give up, (3) curiosity, the predisposition to explore the environment and to acquire information about themselves and the outside world, and (4) self-confidence, that is the self-efficacy in own ability to handle the challenges, obstacles and barriers that may be encountered in pursuing the goals (Authors et al., in press; Savickas, 2011).

Job loss is one of the most difficult, stressful and negative conditions that an individual may experience in own work life; for this reason studies on adult's career adaptability present in literature focus on unemployment. It can be particularly helpful in transitions that imply a shift from unemployment to reemployment. For instance, Koen, Klehe, Van Vianen, Zikic, and Nauta (2010) observed in a group of 218 unemployed individuals that career adaptability, in particular career planning, career control and confidence, predicted, eight months later, the quality of re-employment, defined as need-supplies fit, work satisfaction and low turnover intentions. Moreover, they found that career adaptability influences the way people search for a new job. Specifically, individuals with higher levels of career adaptability used more frequently targeted search strategies; in contrast those with low levels of career adaptability resorted random strategies to a greater extent, that implied a job search for ‘trial-and-error’.

In addition, career adaptability is related to workers' wellbeing: Maggiori, Johnston, Krings, Massoudi, and Rossier (2013) found that career adaptability partially mediated the relationship between job insecurity and job strain and life satisfaction in a sample of Swiss employed and unemployed adults.

Examining the relationship between career adaptability, hope, optimism and time perspective, Authors (2013) observed that young unemployed with higher levels of career adaptability had higher time perspective; they had more detailed and precise goals for their medium and long-term future, perceived better chance of improvement in their professional sphere in the long term (next 10 years), and assumed greater responsibility for their career choices. Moreover, the authors found that participants with higher levels of career adaptability showed also higher levels of optimism, hope, and life satisfaction.

## 3. Hope

The Oxford University Press Dictionary (2014) defines hope (noun) “a feeling of expectation and desire for a particular thing to happen” or (verb) “to want something to happen or be the case”. Scioli et al. (1997) considered hope as an affective variable that sustains action and affects thoughts and behaviors. It is an emotion rooted from biological, psychological and social resources (Scioli, Ricci, Nyugen, & Scioli, 2011).

Hope therefore is a positive motivational state, in which people have a sense of agency (willpower) and pathways (waypower) for goals (Snyder, 1994, 2000). Agency or willpower regards the determination to start and sustain the effort needed

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