The impact of career boundarylessness on subjective career success: The role of career competencies, career autonomy, and career insecurity ☆

Sidika N. Colakoglu *

Department of Management Marketing and Entrepreneurship, Norfolk State University, 700 Park Ave., Norfolk, VA. 23504, USA

A B S T R A C T

Based on the theoretical frameworks of the career enactment and the stress perspectives, this study develops and tests a model in which career boundarylessness affects subjective career success through its effect on three career competencies—knowing-why, knowing-how, and knowing-whom—and career autonomy and career insecurity. The results provided empirical support for the importance of career autonomy, career insecurity, and the development of knowing-why and knowing-how competencies in the successful pursuit of a boundaryless career. The implications of these findings are discussed.

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The careers landscape has dramatically changed over the last two decades due to major social, economic, technological, and organizational changes. Traditional careers associated with rapid, upward mobility in a single hierarchy have increasingly been replaced by boundaryless careers that are relatively unpredictable and disorderly, and frequently involve horizontal mobility across organizational boundaries (Arthur, Inkson, & Pringle, 1999; Arthur & Rousseau, 1996; DeFillippi & Arthur, 1996). In the era of boundaryless careers the consideration of subjective career success has become particularly important because it is believed that in the pursuit of highly heterogeneous and unique career paths, only individuals themselves can meaningfully define and assess their own career success with reference to self-defined standards, needs, values, career stages, and aspirations (Arthur & Rousseau, 1996; Betz & Fitzgerald, 1987; Gattiker & Larwood, 1986).

The current careers literature suggests that the pursuit of a boundaryless career can both support and hinder one's attainment of subjective career success which is commonly defined as individuals' feelings of accomplishment and satisfaction with their careers (Judge, Cable, Boudreau, & Bretz, 1995). The career enactment and the stress perspectives provide the theoretical frameworks for explaining the relationship between career boundarylessness and subjective career success.

On one hand, characterized as a weak situation by the career enactment perspective, a boundaryless career can provide individuals with extensive autonomy (Arthur et al., 1999; Mirvis & Hall, 1996; Mischel, 1977; Weick, 1996). No longer constrained by hierarchical advancement principles and thinking, individuals are free to pursue autonomous careers in which they can attain subjective career success. On the other hand, according to the stress perspective, the pursuit of a relatively discontinuous, idiosyncratic boundaryless career with periodic transitions and few external guides can also be very stressful (Mirvis & Hall, 1996). The resultant career insecurity and uncertainty can reduce individuals' ability to spare necessary time and effort to attain personally meaningful success in their careers.

Although the positive and negative effects of a boundaryless career on achieving subjective career success have been conceptualized by career researchers, the literature still lacks both an empirical assessment of the consequences of having a boundaryless career and an understanding of why the boundarylessness of a career might affect individuals' subjective assessment

of career success. In an attempt to fill these gaps, the current study develops and tests a process model that specifies two factors—career autonomy, career insecurity—that explain the relationship between career boundarylessness and subjective career success.

The boundaryless careers literature has also conceptually advocated that because lifetime employment is being replaced by the goal of employability, individuals need to acquire a different set of competencies to successfully navigate their boundaryless careers. Arthur et al. (1999) and DeFillippi and Arthur (1996) identified three career competencies—knowing-why, knowing-how and knowing-whom—required to cope with complexity and change in today's career environment. Even though the careers literature has paid a considerable amount of attention to identifying and conceptually explaining these competencies, there has been lack of empirical studies conducted to test the relationships between these competencies and the consequences of experiencing a boundaryless career. Thus, this study's proposed model (see Fig. 1) includes career competencies as intermediary variables explaining the relationship between career boundarylessness and career autonomy and career insecurity that in turn impact subjective career success.

In the careers literature, the lack of empirical research associated with boundaryless careers can be partially explained by a lack of a comprehensive and theoretically grounded scale to measure the boundarylessness of a career. To understand the nature of boundaryless careers, previous research used qualitative and/or ethnographic research that focused mainly on specific industries and nations (Arthur et al., 1999; Jones, 1996; Saxenian, 1996). With some exceptions (Arthur et al., 1999), these studies have assessed the boundarylessness of a career by only the frequency of the inter-firm mobility experienced by career actors without paying much attention to the type and/or direction of their career moves. Based on Arthur et al.'s (1999) conceptualization and findings, the current study aims to develop a comprehensive and multi-dimensional scale that assesses the structural characteristics (i.e., frequency, type, and direction) of a boundaryless career.

In sum, the current study aims to contribute to the careers literature by developing a process model that specifically focuses on studying possible consequences of experiencing a boundaryless career. Within the frameworks of the career enactment and stress perspectives, the study identifies and examines the intermediary role of career competencies, career autonomy, and career insecurity in explaining the relationship between career boundarylessness and subjective career success. Moreover, the current study attempts to develop a theoretically grounded and comprehensive career boundarylessness measure to stimulate further empirical research in the careers literature.

The model and the hypotheses

In the careers literature, the career enactment perspective associates boundaryless careers with positive outcomes (Arthur et al., 1999). According to the enactment perspective, rather than simply responding to the changing environment, individuals are considered to be main agents in managing and shaping their own careers. It has been advocated that career boundarylessness depicted by extensive interorganizational mobility and non-linearity positively influences career autonomy (Mirvis & Hall, 1996; Weick, 1996) because experiencing an ambiguous and less standardized boundaryless career provides individuals with a greater scope to construct career paths that are mainly derived from individual choices and preferences. Career autonomy, in turn, is expected to enhance subjective career success. In the present research, career autonomy is defined as the extent to which individuals perceive the freedom and discretion to determine and influence the pacing, shape, and direction of their careers.

Career boundarylessness is also associated with negative outcomes (Mirvis & Hall, 1996). The stress perspective taking its roots from the stress literature identifies career insecurity as an important stressor with potentially adverse impacts on subjective career success. Consistent with job insecurity research (Greenhalgh & Rosenblatt, 1984) and Kanter's (1989) definition of employment insecurity, the present study defines career insecurity as the sense of powerlessness to maintain desired employability in one's career. Similar to Greenhalgh and Rosenblatt's (1984) conceptualization, career insecurity is experienced when there is a perceived threat both to the continuity of one's employability and to the quality of subsequent employment.
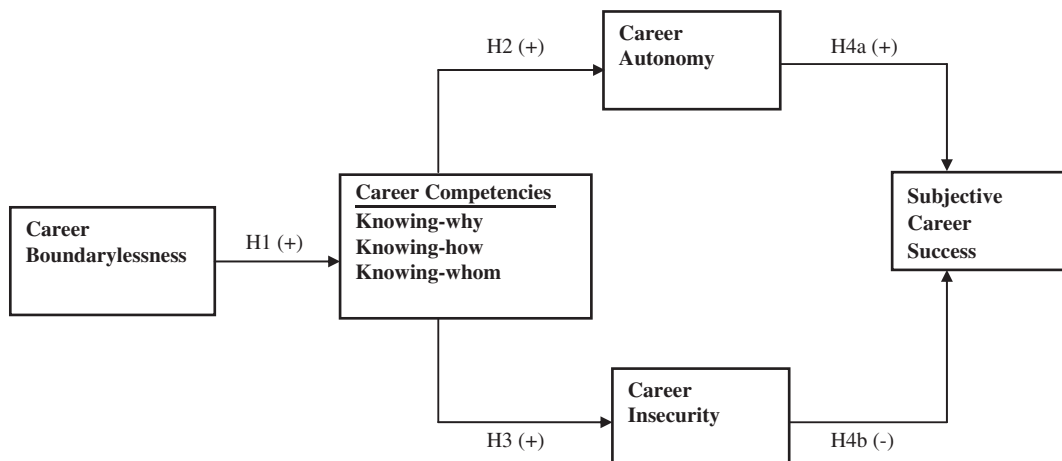

Fig. 1. Hypothesized structural model.