

Career Strategies in a Non-Western Culture: Navigating the Maze

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Aim: *This study utilizes a sample of 440 highly educated professionals (Kuwaitis and self-initiated expatriates(SIE)) working in Kuwait in times of talent shortage, but within a context of economic recession and declining oil prices, to explore their coping mechanisms as manifested by their career tactics and strategies. The study also examines the impact of a set of individual and situational factors on the proactive career strategies used, and it tests the construct and external validities of the measures used.*

Methodology: Measures: *A set of questionnaires was used to measure the dependent variable, i.e., proactive career behavior, and nine presumed predictors of proactivity. These are demographics (i.e., nationality, age, gender, education), psychological states and attitudes (“aspiring for senior position”, “intention to stay/leave the organization”, “career barriers” and “career self-efficacy”), as well as the respondent’s economic sector (public/private).*

Analysis: *Factor Analysis statistical procedure was used to identify the main dimensions of the proactive career behavior scale. Logistic regression, stepwise regression, Decision Tree analysis, and discriminant analysis were used to decipher and ascertain the relative influence of the various independent variables on the six dependent variables and to double check the consistency of the results.*

Findings: *The results of the Factor Analysis revealed four dimensions, which represent the strategic bundles used by the respondents, namely “Boundarless behavior”, “seeking access to power”, “enhancing competence”, and “self-promotion”. Using the four strategy bundles, Cluster Analysis was used to identify the strategic orientations of the respondents, and it revealed two orientations, referred to as “Hunters” (put high emphasis on all tactics) and “Dwellers” (put low emphasis on all strategies).*

The study assessed the impact of the abovementioned predictors on the six dependent variables (i.e., overall career proactivity, four career strategy bundles, which represent the components of the total proactivity; and the career strategy orientations). Regression analysis, Decision Tree and Discriminant analyses produced consistent and complementary results. All the procedures confirmed the insignificant effect of gender and consistent positive effect of career aspiration (i.e., aspiring for senior jobs) and career barriers on all six dependent variables. It is important to underscore the highly significant and dominating effect of “aspiration” on proactivity which, interestingly, was far bigger than that of “career self-efficacy”. Nationality and Sector played relatively big roles on overall proactivity and strategy orientation but their effects were not consistent across the four component/bundles of proactivity. Specifically, Kuwaitis and private sector employees are more proactive than their expatriate peers and public sector employees. In addition, the findings indicate that generally expatriates tend to be Dwellers more than Hunters. This is an unexpected result because SIE, by the very nature of their pursuit of self-initiated international careers and absence of outside support, are characterized as the embodiment of bounadryless and protean attitudes and behaviors. This result is attributed to the survival mode expatriates find themselves in once they join a Gulf Cooperation Council labor force. The Kuwaiti market segmentation and HRM practices contribute to a precarious employment situation of SIE. In this respect, the literature suggests that in high-risk situations employees resort to less forceful measures to advance their careers which is indeed what we find here. With respect to the rest of the predictors, all of them have positive effects on proactivity except for age and “intention to leave”.

All the results are explained within the context of the Kuwaiti triple segmented labor markets, discriminatory HRM systems and the larger socio-political system. Furthermore, the study extends the external validity of the measure of the protean career management behavior used to the Arabian Gulf region and to self-initiated expatriate employees in developing countries.

Rational: *Widespread organizational restructuring due to the global economic crisis are wreaking havoc on traditional careers and led an increasing number of young and older people to shift from ‘linear careers’ managed by organizations to ‘non-linear careers’ which are left for individuals to manage. The SIE being good exemplars of the phenomena of boundaryless and protean career attitudes and behavior, gave us a*

valuable opportunity to compare them with the Kuwaiti citizens who have no personal experience with expatriation. Both samples work in Kuwait where SIE represents 65% of the total workforce.

In view of the fact that an increasing number of people are experiencing difficulties in their attempts to adapt to the uncertainties of career life, researchers encourage endorsing protean career attitudes. In addition, careerists are encouraged to have an open mind regarding possibility of having boundaryless career (e.g., need for inter- or intra-organizational moves) or embedded career. Such positive attitudes towards career mobility prepare them for careers involving frequent changes in employers and in the very nature of the work they perform.

Originality and value: *Literature reviews indicate that, while the protean career model has been very successful in informing theory, until recently it has only prompted limited research and application, due to lack of appropriate psychometric measures and more so the lack of skill-based scales. This research tests and confirms the construct and external validity of a set of scales that measure career management skills and behavior by applying it to an Arab culture and to expatriates of different nationalities. It also contributes to protean career theory by linking several individual and situational factors to career proactivity which addresses a gap in the literature. The findings may also help career counselling efforts in the region to discern how employees may effectively 'self-manage' their careers. The shift from circumscribed careers to boundarylessness/boundary-crossing careers confronts us with a problem outside our previous experience. No norms and few models exist to tell how to evaluate, plan, review, analyze, promote, or otherwise live out a boundaryless career. This study should lead to a better understanding of this domain. It is important to note that self-initiated expatriation in general, and self-initiated expatriation in developing countries in particular, is largely omitted in the HRM and expatriation literature. It is particularly absent regarding expatriation within developing countries. Furthermore, career proactive behavior is largely under-investigated as most researchers focused on career proactive attitudes. This study attempts to simultaneously address these literature gaps by linking of career proactive behavior and self-initiated expatriation within developing countries. Given the scarcity of psychometric measures on protean career behavior this study has examined the construct and concurrent validity of one of the few measures available and extend its validity to a non-Western culture.*