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## **PROACTIVITY IN THE CONTEXT OF PROFESSIONAL CAREER CHANGE**

### **Introduction**

Globalization, virtualization and the permanently growing competitiveness of economic environment determine several social and structural changes in an organization structure that are inevitably related to the changes in the employee-employer relationship. The transitions that occur in the economic and social areas evidently influence the attitude, objectives, values and behavior of employees on the labour market.

The core of employment is constituted by a psychological contract. In the classic definition “the employment relationship consists of a unique combination of beliefs held by an individual and his employer about what they expect of one another...” (Armstrong, 2004, p.181). In other words, a contract includes convictions on employee’s obligations and expectations from the employer and vice versa. The knowledge and understanding of mutual expectations enables both parties to give comparatively coherent answers to the two key questions: *what can I expect from the organization and what can the organization expect from me?* The contract is not permanent and indisputable, it is subject to change and may be – more or less directly – renegotiated in view of new circumstances and time lapse. The present conditions influence particularly the quality of that relationship.

At the end of the 20th century, the competition and necessity to meet the changing requirements of economic environment were decisive as regards the “to be or not to be” of organizations. The implementation of procedures, e.g. downsizing, or IT made it possible to meet the demands of the

current market challenges but at the same time they resulted in the necessity to introduce new solutions in the field of personnel policy. Moreover, labor market analysts noticed a significant decrease in staff loyalty towards their organizations, which was reflected by a substantially increased number of transitions between organizations. As a result, new solutions emerged as regards the employee-employer relationship (Mirvis, Hall, 1994) in which the classical psychological contract between an employee and the employer was profoundly revised. The changes concerned mainly the distribution of emphasis concerning the range of employee's responsibility, autonomy and development.

On the one hand, there are contracts that emphasize the subjectivity and self-agency of workers. Transactional contracts enable employees to implement their resources such as skills, knowledge, money, reputation, time with the aim of maximizing their own benefits. On the other hand, organizations that are based on strong community bonds let employees use the jointly collected resources and the main benefit for individuals is the sense of security and the assurance of permanent employment. Such a contract, in return for the employee's loyalty and commitment, guaranteed a permanent work contract and opportunities for promotion in company's structures. That employment model was based on relational contracts. The employer decided on the pace and direction of the employee's development and the success depended on the commitment and loyalty to the organization. The issues concerning the changes in contracts, with the consideration of the whole range of mutual benefits and obligations, are reflected in the new approaches to professional career.

## **1. From organizational to protean career**

Economic environment is diversified and variable. On the one hand, the diversification of international corporations often involves the necessity to enter into relationships with entities on the local market. On the other hand, small businesspeople who provide services or products meet the requirements of new niches that constantly appear on local markets (Defillipi, Arthur, 1994). The

complexity, variety and dynamics of the environment require flexibility and readiness for organizations to face new challenges. Similar flexibility is required from employees, who must frequently experience transitions both between different workplaces and methods of work and between the employment and education, which is often the condition to survive on the labour market. The issue of transitions that occur in the employee-employer relationship and the necessity for numerous changes of workplaces throughout professional careers were investigated by researchers D.Rousseau and B.Arthur (1999). They introduced a new perception of the concept of professional career. The traditional concept of career was based on the relational contract between an organization and an employee which was based on a system of mutual benefits that resulted from long-term employment. In the extreme cases it was a life-time employment. This model functioned in the economic reality for several years after the II World War. However, at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, together with the instability of business environment, the variability and unpredictability of market requirements, the model lost its functionality as it did not ensure the structural flexibility of organizations, which was one of the crucial conditions for appropriate reactions to the changing expectations of economic environment. The model of linear career was replaced by two new concepts of career paths: a boundaryless career (Arthur, 1994) and a protean career (Hall, 1996). According to the researchers, we are witnessing a breakthrough in the paradigm as a career that is closely connected with an organization is becoming a thing of the past and a new type of career is emerging which emphasizes the subjectivity of the employee and his/her responsibility for his/her own development. Thus, the suggested theoretical assumption points at the limited range of issues that can be discussed with the application of the concept of organizational career since the hitherto linear model, which implied the maintenance of the continuity and sequentiality of organizational career, proved to be insufficient to describe and understand the contemporary conditions of labour reality.

## **2. Boundaryless career**

Boundaryless career is the opposite of organizational career as it does not involve sequentiality, predictability and linearity. Professional career that follows such model consists in going beyond the restrictions related to a profession, place of accommodation or membership to a particular organization

and – consequently – requires the capacity to find and take advantage of various opportunities that are available on the labour market. Efficient functioning in such reality is more like “grasping chances” than accomplishing particular objectives in order to be continually promoted to higher levels within one organization. Sullivan, Arthur (2006, after Turska, Sieradzka, 2015,p. 220) describe such career model by two dimensions – 1. Physical mobility, which means exceeding physical barriers by individuals, i.e. changing organizations, place of accommodation, profession, etc. – 2. Psychological mobility, which means the capacity of individuals to introduce changes to their careers and be open to change.

### **3. Protean career**

D.T.Hall (1996) recalls the myth of Proteus, who could not only predict the future but also was capable of changing his shape. Thus, *protean* implies intentional variability and readiness to transform. Analogically, a contemporary player on the labour market that follows the protean career model manages his/her career including the whole life space and personal objectives and his/her success is not measured by such objective factors as positions, remuneration or status but by a subjective assessment of one’s own achievements. Such understanding of career emphasizes particularly the importance of the subjectivity and self-agency of individuals as well as the lack of attachment to one organization. In this context, one should recall the processual concept of identity which is referred to by Bańka (2015) as the *identity design*. Personal life competence of every individual is generated in the course of a constant interaction with the environment, continuous action, change of roles, a permanent interaction with the others and confrontations with potential stressors . Such resources cannot be obtained through formal training, school and university education, work placements or internships (Kirby, Kirby and Lewis, 2002; in Bańka, 2015, p.100). In this approach, identity is manifested by a permanent acquisition of competences by individuals which are subject to an ongoing verification and evaluation through the acceptance of new roles and obligations.

### **4. Proactivity and professional challenges**

According to Bańka (2015), proactivity in its general meaning involves activities undertaken intentionally by individuals in real time but without the desire to achieve particular targets in a particular place and time. The individual's activity does not result from the desire to meet current needs but it is based mainly on the prediction of future targets and such changes in the external environment that will substantially increase the probability of success. The willpower and the influence on the social environment are the basic determinants of proactivity. Bańka (2015) presents 6 basic activity areas that are typical for proactive individuals. They are as follows. 1. Proactive individuals look for change by a constant search for potential opportunities that may be useful for future goals and they are ready to go beyond the existing barriers. 2. The targets that are set by proactive individuals support changes that result from the development and which modify the way the targets are perceived by social environment, which consequently leads to future achievements. 3. They predict potential problems and undertake adequate "preventive" actions on the basis of a current assessment of effectiveness. 4. They look for completely new solutions, thus rejecting the limitations that result from the tradition or conventional ways of action. 5. They do not stop at the stage of ideas and undertake real measures and attempts while being aware of the risk. 6. They are perseverant in their endeavours but at the same time they are ready to change the strategy of action under particular circumstances. Proactivity in this sense constitutes a metacompetency that may play an important role in various aspects of an individual's life.

When discussing the concept of proactivity, it seems justified to ask how the proactive attitude manifests itself in the area of professional career when optimal adaptation depends on effective development transitions between work, home, employment, unemployment and doing nothing ((Devadason, 2007; Fouad and Bynner, 2008, in: Bańka, 2015, p.97). What behaviours increase the probability that an individual can cope in the case of career discontinuation? One of the inevitably important factors is the active search for information about the expectations of the environment and an adequate adjustment activities with the application of one's own resources. There are two ways of acquiring the information: firstly, inquiring - and secondly, by monitoring the context and social reactions to the individual's behavior. A special sensitivity to feedback is a distinctive feature of proactive people, who use it when learning through the acquisition of new competencies. Individuals

with a low level of proactivity also use feedback but they mainly need it with respect to their role and their aim is to feel that their competencies are appreciated; moreover, they avoid negative judgements (Carver and Scheier, 1987, in: Bańka, 2015)

Self-promoting behaviours and the development of support networks are another dimension that is closely related to proactivity. This is reflected not only by the presentation of one's own opinions but also by the ability to make other people accept them. The effectiveness of such behavior is possible thanks to active monitoring of social environment and the assessment of the acceptance level. In this context, an active and accurate perception of social facts is significant as it constitutes a key condition for a successful self-presentation. (Anderson et al. 2006, in Banka, 2015).

Individual and social innovativeness are further aspects of proactivity. The initiation of activities and the search for a satisfactory employment is the basic manifestation of individual's innovativeness. The situation in which an individual experiences dissatisfaction due to the lack of progress in professional development is defined as a problem that requires the preparation and testing of various strategies. Passiveness and apathy are the opposite of such attitude and they lead to an increasing frustration and sense of injustice that result from the fact that expectations are not accomplished by social and professional environment. Innovativeness in the social sense is related to the individual's eagerness to create oneself as an "attractive market product". However, this is not a sufficient condition for a professional success. The author of numerous publications point out that a situation should be generated where particular subjects (individuals, groups, institutions) are defined that will provide a) a support for the individual's intentions and goals; b) a determination of the allies for new ideas; c) an access to people who are ready to offer support in critical situations (Kirkman and Rosen, 1999, in: Banka, 2015). Thus, self-promoting activity cannot be practically detached from the social context, which creates the background for taking actions.

Proactivity is particularly clearly demonstrated in career management and that does not only concern individuals who are entering the labour market after completing their school education but also the ones who are in different age groups and have to struggle with several career barriers (Lent et al.

in.2000; London 2014, in: Bańka, 2015) and face numerous transitions between education and work, employment and unemployment. It should be pointed out that a breakdown of professional career into episodes has some influence on other fields of life. According to numerous analyses, a figure of a few or a dozen of employment contracts is typical. “The duration of a life career cycle as the derivative of employment cycle measured by the length of contract of employment (tenure) equals 5 to 7 years at present” (Bańka, 2005, in: Bańka, 2015). Numerous changes in the area of professional activity imply several changes in family, social and territorial lives and, consequently, individuals face challenges that require further adaptations to the new requirements of the environment. Effective career management manifests itself in the form of the following four types of behavior: 1 – career planning, i.e. initiating changes in one’s professional and non-professional life; 2 – developing personal resources and skills that improve effectiveness and help combine various aspects of life; 3 – developing consultation behaviours, i.e. looking for advice or help from other people; 4 – undertaking behaviours that aim at the development of social support networks that provide information and assistance. (Claes, Ruiz-Quintanilla, 1998, in: Bańka 2015).

The final area of proactive activities concerns the ability to cope with stress and to develop resilience. Proactive approach is demonstrated by a realistic optimism with a simultaneous awareness of one’s own limitations and of the possibility that unfavourable or dangerous situations may occur. The researchers of the proactive stress management (Aspinwal, Taylor, 1997; in Bańka 2015) identify five stages of the process. Firstly, there is an accumulation of temporal, financial, social and intellectual resources. Secondly, the attention is paid to recognize particular stressors in the environment. Thirdly, there is an initial appraisal which concerns current events and stressors and involves the anticipation of potential future stressors. In the fourth stage particular coping efforts are made. In the fifth stage feedback is implemented, which enables the effectiveness assessment of the measures taken and, consequently, the search for new ways that lead the individual to the solution of the problem. (Aspinwal, Taylor, 1997, in: Bańka, 2015).

Proactivity – in the context of the issues presented above – constitutes an important aspect of human functioning in the uncertain and unstable reality. Motivation, perceived not only as a temporary but intensive involvement but also as the focus and perseverance of an individual to achieve targets related to his/her personal value system is also a crucial element. Another substantial aspect is the level of interpersonal capacity which is manifested by the volume and quality of social support networks that are developed and maintained on the basis of reciprocity. In this case it may be assumed that any abuse in this respect may become ineffective in the long-term perspective. Proactivity also requires some cognitive skills to recognize correctly the signals from the environment and to make justified decisions. The competences described above are included in the individual's procedural knowledge. In order to gain such competences, continuous learning through experience is a necessary condition. A question arises about psychological factors that are decisive as regards undertaking such type of activity and other variables that evidently restrict the possibilities to pursue contemporary professional careers. In this context another question appears: who is going to enter the path of career development through constant choices as regards the direction and the pace of the process and who will be carried by the stream of external events and circumstances.

## **Conclusion**

Present career models undoubtedly involve the necessity to make changes throughout the whole life and the increasingly more common integration of personal and professional lives. As a result, the definitions of development and professional success are subject to numerous transformations and they all emphasize the significance of individual perception of the concepts which largely determine the activities of individuals. Thus, the proactivity construct seems to give an insight into the mechanisms of individual's effective functioning in the environment without continuity and predictability. However, the question on the determinants of activity-oriented approach remains open and requires further theoretical considerations and empirical investigations.



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## Abstract

Social and structural changes in the economic environment affect all aspects of human life and determine the activities of man. The aim of the article is to grasp the changes on the labour market through the analysis of transformations as regards the conceptualization of professional career at times with a significantly limited predictability, the lack of continuity and permanent variability. In response to the changing requirements of organizations and other economic entities, different needs, attitudes and behaviours of labour market participants emerged which are reflected by the new conceptualization of professional dynamics that is based on two theoretical models. They are: the boundaryless career (Arthur, 1994) and protean career models (Hall, 1996). In this context a question arises about the determinants of the individual's adaptation to the discontinuous and chaotic environment. One of the theoretical proposals is the aspect of proactivity, which is closely related both to the initiative and endeavor of individuals to make changes and to a permanent and active analysis of the environment regarding the opportunities and chances that potentially enable the development of various competences.