

## Proactive Personality and Career Success : What's the Connection?

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### Abstract

The aim of this study is to examine the relationship between proactive personality and career success. Data were gathered through questionnaire from a sample of technical employees (n = 180) who worked in MNC status companies located in the Northern States of Peninsular Malaysia. Results indicate that proactive personality was a significant factor in influencing career success. These findings generally supported past findings, which suggested that employees are more likely to gain career success if they possess the characteristics of proactive personality. The findings were discussed and implications were also put forward.

*Keywords:* Proactive personality; career success; technical staff

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### 1.0 INTRODUCTION

Following the global financial crisis and greater competitiveness of global business, most of the organizations in the Asian region (including Malaysia) are constantly engaged in major work force reduction in an attempt to cut down the human capital cost and become more competitive in the business world. Simonetti<sup>1</sup> stated that strategic downsizing especially cutting labour costs were common actions that will be implemented by the organizations that faced with the trauma of economic downturn since these actions can assist organizations to increase profitability in the short-term. As a result, a total of 25,064 employees were laid off from their respective organization in 2009 due to the organizational financial drawbacks.<sup>2</sup> The Malaysian labour market not only continued to go downhill in end of 2009, but the situation got worse in early of 2013 when 444,500 unemployed local individuals registered with the Labour Department of the Ministry of Human Resources, Malaysia, which is the highest for the past four years.<sup>3</sup> These statistics signified that the possibility of employees to have stable career path has been decreased, which employees faced the serious challenges in upholding their career security. This in turn influenced employees' career success.

Besides that, once employees are derailed from their career path, they may fall into negative emotion such as dissatisfaction and depression because they have to face with stressful career transition, which might totally spoil their career life. Those negative emotions not only will bring serious impact on their psychological being, but also affect their desire to gain success. Therefore, positive thinking is imperative to promote employees motivation to achieve career success. This point is consistent

with the suggestion that employees should possess positive traits (i.e. proactive personality) that would instigate them to act with optimism and find ways to lift their motivation for gaining positive career outcomes.<sup>4-5</sup> Further, Silva<sup>6</sup> and Lounsbury *et al.*<sup>7</sup> also strongly stressed that an employee's career success is largely depends on their intellect and character. This means that employees should not only possess knowledge and skills required, but importantly is to have good personality and the right attitude to ensure them always has the endeavours for achieving career success. Hence, it can be deduced from the above discussion, individual's positive traits is the key factor in enhancing ones career success.

Exploring the influence of individual's personality on career success will result in a clear understanding of this relationship and also help employees understand how their career achievement can be influenced by their personality and gain ideas to design an effective career plan. However, minimal research has explored the effects of personality on career success.<sup>8-10</sup> There is a void in the literature because personality is found to be important in many other related domains of organizational behaviour, including leadership, job performance, and job satisfaction. Very few studies have attempted a comprehensive examination of the effects of personality (especially proactive personality) on career success.<sup>4-5,8</sup> To fill this gap, this study intends to examine how proactive personality influences employees' career success. Hence, the main objective of this study is to identify the relationship between proactive personality and career success.

## 2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1 Career Success

Career success can be defined as a pleasurable or positive emotional state resulting from the appraisal of one's work experiences.<sup>11</sup> Recent studies indicate that the level of income, status and promotion that used to determine an individual's career achievement appear to be less relevant once employees achieved a certain level of compensation.<sup>8,12-13</sup> To them, what's important is the personal satisfaction derived from their career. This means that the fundamental qualities of career success deal with an individual's measurable satisfaction in meeting their planned career goal. A progression of positive outcomes in a career may include such events as obtaining work in the profession, achieving job promotions, receiving recognition and monetary rewards. Therefore, success is defined as achieving or gaining a desired goal and measured with the level of satisfaction with the extent of achievement.

### 2.2 Proactive Personality

Proactive personality is define as individuals who take the initiative to create positive change in his/her working environment by overcoming obstacles, improving current circumstances or creating new ones.<sup>5,14</sup> Proactive personality is considered as a stable disposition that characterized individual as someone who likes to challenge the status quo rather than passively accepting and adapting to current conditions.<sup>4</sup> From the above definitions, clearly showed that proactive individual will actively seek for changes and opportunities by means to improvise present work conditions for furthering career success. This means that proactive individual will not feel depress and lose focus if they faced with the career obstacles (e.g. sudden termination or retrenchment), which they will continuously looking for various approaches to be continuously be sustained in their career security and be advanced in their career progression.

Individual with highly proactive personality are likely to perform better than others because they know how to control, create and enact the opportunities and make contribution to their career achievement.<sup>4-5</sup> People with proactive personality may alter their own work methods, procedures and decisions to influence the situations in which they work.<sup>4-5,8,14</sup> Therefore, they are likely to seek for career information, sponsorship and opportunities for self-improvement, such as developing expertise in areas that are critical for the enhancement of career performance. According to Yang *et al.*,<sup>15</sup> proactive personality is one of the importance natural characteristics for individuals to sustain their career achievement in the trend of job insecurity. The reason being that a proactive individual is relatively not limiting themselves in certain circumstances, but is aggressively in searching new resources and chances, and act on them to be continually advance in their career life. Thus, it is not questionable that employees' proactive personality will enact their career success. Following the above discussion, it is hypothesized that:

H1. Proactive personality is positively related to career success.

## 3.0 RESEARCH FRAMEWORK

The research framework for this study is shown in Figure 1. In this study, proactive personality is the independent variable, whereas career success is the dependent variable. This research

framework used integrated model of proactive personality as a guide to predict the direct influences of individuals' proactive personality on their career success. This model posits that individuals' career outcomes are largely determined by their personality traits. Such inherent characteristics (i.e. initiative, flexibility, manipulative and optimistic) will enact individuals' behaviour by making positive influences on their career progression. Hence, the present study tends to examine whether employees' proactive personality will influence their career success. By considering the influences between these two variables, the researchers may provide information for employees in enhancing their career achievement.

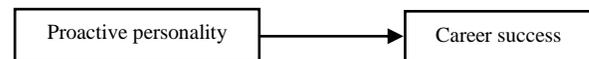


Figure 1 Research framework

## 4.0 METHOD

### 4.1 Population and Sampling

Population for this study includes all technical staffs from MNC status companies located in the Northern states of Peninsular Malaysia (i.e. specifically in Kedah and Penang). There are 50 MNC status companies located in the states of Kedah and Penang. Out of these 50 companies, only 10 companies agreed to participate. Since the exact number of technical employees from each of the companies under study was not known (due to undisclosed data by the participated MNC companies), the rule of thumb suggested by Roscoe (1975) as indicated in Sekaran<sup>16</sup> were used. He proposed that sample size larger than 30 and less than 500 are appropriate, but sample size should be several times (preferably 10 times or more) as large as the number of variables in the multivariate analyses. As the MNC companies were reluctant to reveal the numbers of technical staffs in their companies, the sampling technique of proportionate sampling could not be conducted. Hence, it was decided to divide equally the number of questionnaires that is 30 set for each of the 10 participating companies. This method has been used in previous studies.<sup>17-18</sup> Thus, a total of 300 set of questionnaires were distributed. Out of 300 questionnaires distributed, only 180 questionnaires were returned and usable for further analysis, which constitute of 60% response rate.

113 male and 67 female respondents participated in this study. The average age of the respondents was 32 years old. Malays constitute 62.2% of the survey respondents, followed by 24.4% Malaysian Chinese, 11.7% Malaysian Indians and 1.7% other ethnic groups. Out of 180 respondents, 55% of them were married. The majority of the respondents (97.2%) had higher academic qualifications of either tertiary or diploma, bachelor degree or master degree and above. 19.4% of the respondents had earning between RM3001 and RM4000 per month, and 22.8% had basic salary increment between RM201 and RM400. On average, the respondents had been in their position for 2.5 years and had served their organizations for 2.5 years. Engineers made up 53.3% of the total respondents. The rest consisted of executive, manager and technical workers.

### 4.2 Measurements

Measures for career success were adapted from Greenhaus *et al.*<sup>19</sup>. The 5-items career success scale measured employee's perception on his/her own satisfaction with reference to personal financial/non-financial goals achievement. In addition, proactive

personality is measured by a shortened version of Bateman and Crant's<sup>20</sup> proactive personality scale. The 10-items proactive personality scale assessed the degree of individual efforts in manipulating the difficult work environment by creating and taking opportunities to gain positive outcomes. In this study, each of the adapted questions asked how strongly the respondents agreed or disagreed with the career success and proactive personality statements on a five-point scale that ranged from 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree. Five-point scale was adapted because some respondents might truly feel neutral about the given statement and thus, having a scale with a neutral midpoint is needed.<sup>21-22</sup> This will assist researchers in capturing the unbiased sentiments of respondents. In addition, neutral is a legitimate opinion of respondents, which can't intentionally omitted and force them to choose a more positive or negative response from a scale that without neutral midpoint.<sup>21</sup>

## 5.0 RESULTS

Table 1 presents the internal consistency reliabilities (Cronbach's Alpha), means, standard deviations, and Pearson correlations of variables for the 180 participants. As shown in Table 1, the Cronbach's Alpha for the two variables has satisfactory reliability values ranging from .85 to .89. Table 1 also revealed significant positive relationship between career success and proactive personality ( $r = 0.50, p < 0.01$ ). This result implies that participants with higher proactive personality have higher chances of career success.

**Table 1** Reliability statistics, descriptive statistics and correlations

Variables	$\alpha$	M	SD	1	2
1. Proactive personality	.85	3.85	.49	-	
2. Career success	.89	3.49	.70	.50**	-

Note: n=180; \*\*p<0.01;  $\alpha$  = reliability; M = mean; SD = standard deviation

To test hypothesis 1, regression analysis was conducted. However, prior to conduct regression analysis, several assumptions (i.e. normality, linearity, homoscedasticity, independence of residuals and the absence of multicollinearity) as suggested by Ho<sup>23</sup>, and Tabachnick and Fidell<sup>24</sup> about the relationship between independent and dependent variables have been tested and met. Table 2 depicted the results of regression analysis performed.

Results in Table 2 showed that 25% ( $R^2 = 0.25, F = 60.52, p < 0.01$ ) of the variance in career success was significantly explained by proactive personality. In the model, proactive personality ( $\beta = 0.50, p < 0.01$ ) was found positively associated with career success. Therefore, Hypothesis 1 was supported.

**Table 2** Regression results of proactive personality on career success

	Unstandardized	Standardized	t	Sig.
	Coefficients	Coefficients		
	$\beta$	$\beta$		
(Constant)	.68	.36	1.85	.07
Proactive personality	.73	.50**	7.78	.00

\*\*p< 0.01;  $R^2 = 0.25$ ;  $F = 60.52$

## 6.0 DISCUSSION

The present study shows that there was an association between proactive personality and career success. This provides support for past studies conducted by Barnett and Bradley<sup>8</sup>, Crant<sup>14</sup> and Seibert *et al.*<sup>4-5</sup> The finding implies that employees who possess proactive personality are more success in their career. One possible explanation for this result is that individuals with proactive personality normally do not accept their roles passively. Rather, they challenge the obstacles, seek for approaches, initiate changes and transform such difficulties into useful chances that can promote their sense of success.<sup>20</sup> This means proactive individuals are those who will always aggressively recognize the opportunities, grasp and act on it to benefit their career progression.

Another reason why individuals with proactive personality are more success in their career is because they tend to be self-starters (i.e. initiative), future- oriented, and persistence in doing activities until their objectives achieved.<sup>25</sup> These characteristics are important for individual career success, because more often than not, such characteristics will enact one's behaviour by actively take advantage on the opportunities they have, which results in high level of career success.

## 7.0 RESEARCH IMPLICATIONS

Theoretically, results from this study provide a modest support for the integrated model of proactive personality, which proposed that individuals tend to have high level of career success if they possess the characteristics of proactive personality. This leads to question of whether other kind of personalities would lead to similar career success or not. This study does not explore this question, it remains for future research.

Apart from that, the current research findings have several implications for HR managers. The research results demonstrate that success in career can be better achieved if employees demonstrate proactive personality. Thus, to encourage proactive behaviour among employees, HR practitioners could provides career assessment tools and career planning workshop to serve as the platform for encouraging employees to actively engage in self and environmental assessment, goals setting, strategies implementation, and skills development by means to expand their core competencies. This is because actively engaging in career assessment and planning are specifics actions that are promoted by proactive behaviour that can create conditions leading to career success.

## 8.0 LIMITATION AND DIRECTION FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

There are limitations in the design of this study that might influence the interpretations and generalizations of these findings. This study only concentrated on employees in MNC status companies located in the Northern states of Peninsular Malaysia. Different results might be obtained if the study is conducted in other type of industries such as at SMEs, or local companies in different geographical areas. Based on the regression model, proactive personality only explains 25% of the variance in career success. This indicates that there are other potential factors that might influence employees' career success like organizational HRM practices, job performance, supervisory support and career enhancing strategies. Hence, it is suggested that future research should replicate the framework of

this study by incorporating the mentioned factors to elicit a comprehensive understanding on how personal, organizational, and environmental factors affect individuals' career success.

## 9.0 CONCLUSION

The aim of this study was to examine the relationship between proactive personality and career success. The results indicate that proactive personality did relate to career success. Since the study was conducted at a MNC company, the findings must be interpreted with cautious and cannot be generalized to represent other organization. It is hoped that through the examination of how proactive personality relate to career success, a more complete understanding of the kind of effort needed to enhancer career success will be achieved.

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