

SELF-DIRECTED CAREERS IN THE NEW WORLD OF WORK: PROTEAN CAREER ORIENTATION AND CAREER SELF-EFFICACY AS FOUNDATIONS FOR CAREER SUSTAINABILITY: A NARRATIVE REVIEW

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ABSTRACT

Changes in the world of work driven by digitalization, hybrid work, the gig economy, and organizational restructuring have made careers increasingly non-linear and require individuals to take a more active role in managing their career trajectories. This narrative review synthesizes international literature from reputable journals to explain how *Protean Career Orientation* (PCO)-a *self-directed* and *values-driven* career orientation-contributes to *career sustainability* through enhanced career self-efficacy. Drawing on sustainable career models that emphasize *health, happiness, and productivity*, as well as the *social cognitive career theory* framework, the article proposes that *Protean Career Orientation* strengthens individuals' confidence in making career decisions, acquiring new skills, and navigating change. Career self-efficacy, in turn, promotes adaptive behaviors such as *career self-management, lifelong learning or upskilling, networking* and personal branding, and *job crafting*, which ultimately enhance *employability, subjective career success, and well-being* as indicators of *career sustainability*. This review also highlights the importance of context (*career shocks, work flexibility*) and organizational support (*learning culture, coaching, access to training*) as triggers and amplifiers of these processes. Finally, the article presents a conceptual model and narrative propositions that can serve as a basis for empirical research and as practical guidance for human resource development in the new world of work.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Over the past two decades, changes in work structures, marked by increased digitalization of work processes, the adoption of remote and hybrid work, the expansion of project- and platform-based work (the gig economy), and organizational restructuring, have shifted the basic assumptions underlying traditional careers that were linear, stable, and reliant on organizational career paths. Technological developments have also heightened perceived automation risk and reinforced the need for competency adaptation (Brougham & Haar, 2018). Contemporary career literature emphasizes that individuals now more frequently experience transitions across roles, organizations, and even professions; careers are understood as a series of work experiences and other relevant life experiences, rather than merely hierarchical positions within a single organization (Sullivan & Baruch, 2009). Consequently, *career sustainability* depends not only on organizational policies but also on individuals' capacity to manage change, maintain competency relevance, and preserve *well-being* under conditions of work uncertainty.

This paradigm shift has made two psychological constructs increasingly central. First, *Protean Career Orientation* (PCO) describes a career orientation that positions individuals as the primary agents of career management (*self-directed*) and uses personal values and meaning as a compass for decision making (*values-driven*) (Hall, 2004; Briscoe et al., 2006). Second, career self-efficacy refers to individuals' belief that they can make career decisions, learn new skills, cope with change, and navigate career opportunities. Self-efficacy is an important cognitive mechanism influencing choices, persistence, and adaptive behavior in career development (Bandura, 1977; Lent et al., 1994). Accordingly, examining the relationships among PCO, career self-efficacy, and *career sustainability* is relevant to understanding how workers can build resilient and meaningful careers in the new world of work.

This article aims to develop a narrative review of the roles of *Protean Career Orientation* (PCO) and career self-efficacy as foundations for *career sustainability*. Specifically, the article (1) elaborates the definitions and the development of the literature on PCO, career self-efficacy, and *career sustainability*; (2) synthesizes empirical evidence on the relationships among these constructs; (3) proposes psychological mechanisms and adaptive behaviors that bridge PCO and *career sustainability*; and (4) formulates a conceptual model and narrative propositions to guide future research.

2. DISCUSSION

Theoretical Foundations: Protean Career Perspective, Social Cognitive Career Theory, and the Sustainable Career Model

The concept of the protean career marks a shift from "organization-managed" careers to "self-managed" careers. Hall (2004) emphasized that protean careers are not determined by traditional psychological contracts (loyalty and job security) but by individuals' ability to adapt and pursue psychological success (i.e., a sense of achievement defined subjectively). The *self-directed* dimension emphasizes autonomy and initiative in career planning and

decision making, whereas the *values-driven* dimension emphasizes the consistency of career decisions with personal values and identity (Briscoe et al., 2006).

As a cognitive mechanism linking career orientation to behavior, *Social Cognitive Career Theory* (SCCT) positions self-efficacy as a central determinant of choices, goals, perseverance, and performance in career contexts. SCCT emphasizes that beliefs about one's capabilities, together with outcome expectations and goals, influence exploratory behavior, decision making, and coping strategies in the face of barriers (Bandura, 1977; Lent et al., 1994). In the new world of work, career self-efficacy becomes psychological capital that enables individuals to take agentic roles when career paths are no longer clearly provided by organizations. Career sustainability can be understood through the sustainable career model, which stresses that *sustainable careers* must maintain a dynamic balance among indicators of *health, happiness, and productivity* over time and must account for the interaction between the individual and context (De Vos et al., 2020). In parallel, the *sustainable employability* approach emphasizes individuals' capability to achieve what they value through work, with supportive work contexts as a prerequisite (van der Klink et al., 2016). Together, these perspectives highlight that *career sustainability* is not merely about "staying employed" but about simultaneously maintaining competency relevance, performance, and *well-being*.

Protean Career Orientation (PCO)

Protean Career Orientation (PCO) refers to individuals' tendency to take responsibility for their careers and to make career decisions based on personal values and meaning. Hall (2004) described the protean career as a "meta-career" that requires continual learning and adaptation to changes in work context. Briscoe et al. (2006) operationalized PCO through two primary dimensions: (1) *self-directed* career management and (2) *values-driven* career attitude. In modern organizational contexts, individuals with high PCO tend to be more proactive in exploring development opportunities, seeking feedback, and building strategies for both internal and external mobility. Empirical studies show that PCO is associated with *employability* and other career outcomes through behavioral pathways. For example, Cortellazzo et al. (2020) found that PCO relates to *employability* through specific behavioral antecedents and emphasized that protean orientation is linked to individuals' readiness to remain relevant in the labor market. Longitudinal research also shows dynamics in which increases in PCO predict increases in *career self-management* behavior over time (Haenggli et al., 2021). However, PCO does not automatically translate into career success. The relationship between PCO and various outcomes may depend on psychological resources (e.g., self-efficacy), structural opportunities, and organizational support. Therefore, understanding the cognitive mechanisms that mediate the effects of PCO is important for building a strong theoretical argument.

Career Self-Efficacy

Career self-efficacy reflects individuals' belief that they can perform tasks relevant to career management, such as making career decisions, evaluating alternatives, learning new skills, building networks, and adapting to changes in roles or competency demands. According to

self-efficacy theory, perceived capability influences activity choices, perseverance, and reactions to obstacles (Bandura, 1977). In SCCT, self-efficacy is viewed as a core predictor of career behavior because it shapes individuals' goals and strategies when facing opportunities and constraints (Lent et al., 1994). The literature also suggests that PCO can strengthen career self-efficacy. A *self-directed* orientation encourages individuals to build *mastery* experiences through exploratory actions (e.g., trying new roles, attending training, or taking cross-functional projects), while the *values-driven* dimension clarifies identity and evaluation standards, thereby increasing confidence in career choices. Li et al. (2019) found that PCO is positively associated with *career decision self-efficacy* and that this self-efficacy mechanism explains the relationship between PCO and *career decidedness*. These findings support the argument that PCO fosters the belief "I can manage my career," which in turn guides adaptive behavior.

Career Sustainability: From Employability to Well-Being

Career sustainability can be defined as individuals' ability to maintain and develop their careers over the long term by balancing performance and *productivity*, *well-being*, and a sense of meaning or career satisfaction. De Vos et al. (2020) emphasized that *sustainable careers* are dynamic processes shaped over time by interactions among individuals, organizations, and broader contexts. In addition, the concept of *sustainable employability* highlights that individuals are considered "sustainable" when they have the capability to achieve what they value through work and when the work context enables those achievements (van der Klink et al., 2016). From this lens, *career sustainability* encompasses both objective and subjective outcomes. Objective outcomes may include performance, career mobility, and job continuity, whereas subjective outcomes include career satisfaction, work meaning, and *healthy* psychological functioning. The new world of work makes the *well-being* dimension increasingly salient: careers that are "successful" but compromise *health* are at risk of being unsustainable in the long term. Accordingly, a conceptual model that positions adaptive behaviors as pathways to a balance among *health*, *happiness*, and *productivity* becomes crucial (De Vos et al., 2020).

Psychological Mechanisms and Adaptive Behaviors

Protean Career Orientation (PCO) is expected to foster *career sustainability* not only through intentions or attitudes but through psychological mechanisms (self-efficacy) and concrete adaptive behaviors. Career self-efficacy can increase individuals' likelihood of engaging in adaptive behaviors because it strengthens outcome expectations (efforts are seen as likely to pay off) and reduces perceived risk associated with change. Several adaptive behaviors frequently discussed in contemporary career literature are described below. Table 1 conceptually illustrates that PCO provides motivational drives (agency and personal values) that make individuals more willing to take responsibility for their career development. Career self-efficacy then functions as a "driving engine" that translates this orientation into adaptive actions. When these actions are enacted consistently, individuals are more likely to maintain *employability*, achieve *subjective career success*, and protect their *well-being*, which ultimately supports a sustainable career trajectory:

Variable	Definition and Key Indicators	Why Triggered by PCO (agency & values)	Role of Career Self-Efficacy (psychological mechanism)	Contribution to Career Sustainability	References
Protean Career Orientation (PCO)	A self-directed and values-driven career orientation (managing one's career independently and guided by values/meaning). Indicators: independent decision making, exploration, and searching for value congruence.	PCO emphasizes individuals' responsibility for their career direction and commitment to personal values, thereby encouraging initiative for change (rather than waiting for the organization).	PCO provides a "control framework" that makes individuals more willing to try, learn, and face uncertainty; its effects are often realized through higher career self-efficacy and adaptive readiness.	Promotes employability and subjective career success through proactive and meaningful career decisions; helps individuals sustain non-linear careers.	Hall, 2004; Briscoe & Hall, 2006; Briscoe, Hall, & DeMuth, 2006.
Career self-efficacy (career self-efficacy / career decision self-efficacy)	Belief in one's capability to make career decisions, learn new skills, cope with change, and navigate opportunities. Indicators: confidence for exploration, decision making, and performance in career tasks.	PCO provides agency experiences (feeling "in control of one's career") and encourages mastery experiences (trying roles/skills),	Self-efficacy increases outcome expectations (effort is expected to pay off), increases persistence, and reduces perceived risk/threat when facing transitions.	Triggers adaptive behaviors that maintain competency relevance, improve career decisions, and protect well-being through a sense of control.	Bandura, 1997; Lent, Brown, & Hackett, 1994; Lent & Hackett, 1987; Karimi et al., 2019.

which strengthen
beliefs in
personal
capability.

Career	Psychosocial resources for adaptability coping with developmental (concern, tasks, transitions, and career control, trauma. Indicators: concern curiosity, (future orientation), control confidence) (sense of control), curiosity (exploration), and confidence (self-confidence).	PCO facilitates concern and curiosity (opportunity exploration) and emphasizes control (self-direction), thereby strengthening adapt-abilities.	Self-efficacy primarily strengthens the confidence and control dimensions, making individuals more ready to enact adaptation plans (not merely intend them).	Supports sustained adaptation: smoother transitions, maintained employability, and increased long-term career opportunities.	Savickas & Porfeli, 2012; Rudolph et al., 2017; Karimi et al., 2019.
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Table 1 summarizes that *Protean Career Orientation* (PCO), as a *self-directed* and *values-driven* career orientation, encourages individuals to take control of their career direction through independent decisions, role/skill exploration, and the search for value congruence (Hall, 2004; Briscoe & Hall, 2006; Briscoe et al., 2006). This orientation does not stop at attitudes; it operates through a key psychological mechanism: career self-efficacy, defined as the belief that individuals can make career decisions, learn new competencies, and cope with change. Self-efficacy strengthens the expectation that effort will lead to progress, increases persistence, and reduces perceived risk during transitions (Bandura, 1997; Lent et al., 1994; Karimi et al., 2019). Furthermore, self-efficacy reinforces adaptive behaviors/resources such as *career adaptability* (concern, control, curiosity, confidence), so that individuals are more prepared to execute adaptation plans rather than merely intend to do so when facing career demands and shocks (Savickas & Porfeli, 2012; Rudolph et al., 2017). When this sequence operates consistently, the ultimate outcome is *career sustainability*: *employability* is maintained, *subjective career success* increases (satisfaction/meaning), and *well-being* is better protected across increasingly non-linear career trajectories.

Context and Antecedents in the New World of Work

Although PCO and self-efficacy operate at the individual level, career development processes always unfold within context. The sustainable career model emphasizes that careers are shaped by multiple stakeholders and conditions that change over time (De Vos et al., 2020). Two contextual categories particularly relevant in the new world of work are triggers and supports (resources).

First, triggers such as *career shocks* (e.g., layoffs, restructuring, technological change) can force individuals to reflect on career choices and accelerate the need for adaptation. At the same time, flexible work arrangements such as hybrid, remote, or project-based work increase autonomy while also increasing uncertainty, thereby heightening the need for *self-directed* career management. The gig economy reinforces this logic because individuals often must manage a portfolio of projects, build reputations, and maintain work relationships across clients or organizations (Ashford et al., 2018).

Second, organizational support can strengthen the impact of PCO and self-efficacy on adaptive behaviors. A *learning culture*, *coaching/mentoring*, access to training, and opportunities for internal mobility can serve as resources that enable individuals to convert motivation into concrete action. De Vos et al. (2020) emphasized that *career sustainability* is a shared responsibility involving contributions from both individuals and organizations; therefore, organizational interventions that support learning and development are highly relevant.

Conceptual Model and Narrative Propositions

Based on the literature synthesis, the proposed conceptual pathway can be summarized as follows:

New world of work context (digitalization, hybrid work, gig work, *career shocks*, learning

demands) → *Protean Career Orientation* (PCO) → Career self-efficacy → Adaptive behaviors → Career sustainability. To clarify the argument and facilitate the development of empirical research, this narrative review formulates several propositions in the following table:

Component/Proposition	Relationship (direction and role)	Core Theoretical Rationale (synthesis)	Key Mechanisms	Indicators/Operationalization	Outcome Implications (career sustainability)	References
Conceptual model	New world of work context → PCO → Career self-efficacy → Adaptive behaviors → Career sustainability	Changes in work structures (digitalization, flexibility, gig work, restructuring) make careers less linear and increase demands for individual agency. PCO emphasizes self-directed career management and values-driven decision making as adaptive responses to uncertainty. Career self-efficacy (belief in one's ability to manage	Agency and self-regulation (initiative, goal setting, monitoring). Strengthening competence beliefs through mastery experiences and social support. Transforming attitudes into behavior through self-efficacy mechanisms and outcome expectations (SCCT).	PCO: Protean career attitudes scale (self-directed; values-driven). Self-efficacy: career decision self-efficacy / occupational self-efficacy. Adaptive behaviors: career self-management; career adaptability (concern, control, curiosity, confidence); job crafting; upskilling; networking and personal branding.	Sustainable employability Subjective career success Well-being	(Hall, 2004; Briscoe et al., 2006; Sullivan & Baruch, 2009; De Vos et al., 2020; Ashford et al., 2018)

transitions,
develop skills,
and make career
decisions)
bridges
orientation and
action.

Repeated
adaptive actions
(learning,
networking, job
crafting, self-
management)
support
employability,
subjective
success, and
well-being.

Proposition	High disruption and uncertainty conditions → PCO becomes more relevant for predicting sustainable employability (vs. traditional orientation)	In volatile environments (career shocks, gig work, restructuring, crises), organizational career paths become less predictable; individuals need to rely on self-	Adaptive coping with shocks: goal reorientation, rapid reskilling, opportunity exploration.	Career shocks: unexpected events (layoffs, mergers, pandemics) and their attributes (valence, control, intensity). Flexible/gig work contexts: proportion of project work, job autonomy, income/role uncertainty.	Ability to maintain employability and career mobility in open (project-based) labor markets. Reduces "career derailment" during shocks by accelerating adaptation.	(Sullivan & Baruch, 2009; Ashford et al., 2018; Akkermans et al., 2018; Akkermans et al., 2020; Wiernik & Kostal, 2019)
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directed strategies.	evidence)	intensity) or multi-group
PCO helps individuals make sense of change, set a values- based compass, and seek opportunities across organizational boundaries.	becomes more salient when psychological contracts are more transactional.	comparison (stable vs. disruptive contexts).

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study uses a narrative review approach to develop a conceptual argument regarding the relationships among *Protean Career Orientation*, career self-efficacy, adaptive behaviors, and *career sustainability*. A narrative review was chosen because it enables the integration of multiple streams of literature (vocational behavior, career development, and human resource management) and emphasizes the development of a conceptual framework relevant to the new world of work. The literature search focused on reputable international articles published in journals indexed in major databases, using key terms such as "*protean career orientation*", "*career self-efficacy*", "*career adaptability*", "*career self-management*", "*job crafting*", "*employability*", and "*sustainable careers*". Article selection considered relevance to the core constructs, clarity of theoretical/empirical contributions, and connections to modern work contexts (e.g., work flexibility, digitalization, or the gig economy). The selected articles were then analyzed thematically to identify recurring patterns of relationships, mechanisms, contexts, and outcomes in the literature.

4. CONCLUSION

Contemporary career literature indicates that the new world of work increases the need for individuals to manage their careers independently. This narrative review concludes that *Protean Career Orientation* (PCO) has the potential to serve as an important foundation for *career sustainability* because it promotes agency and value congruence, which in turn strengthen career self-efficacy. Career self-efficacy functions as a key mechanism facilitating adaptive behaviors (*career self-management*, *career adaptability*, *upskilling*, *networking*/personal branding, and *job crafting*), enabling individuals to maintain *employability*, enhance career satisfaction, and protect *well-being* over the long term. From a practical standpoint, organizations need to build a *learning culture* and career support systems that reinforce these processes as part of a shared responsibility for *sustainable careers*. Future research may test the proposed propositions using longitudinal designs, consider the influence of *career shocks*, and explore digital mechanisms (platform learning and online reputation) in managing protean careers.

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