https://doi.org/10.36315/2023inpact052
Psychological Applications and Trends 2023

STRATEGIC CAREER BEHAVIORS IN FLEXIBLE WORKING PATTERNS: A MEDIATION ANALYSIS

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Abstract

The main purpose of this study is to predict the use of strategic career behaviors from a set of antecedents and to determine their impact on a variety of consequences in a sample of European workers. A total of 739 employees (Male=442, 59.8%) participated in this study, with a mean age of 27.64 years (SD=8.48; Min-Max=18-70), working mostly full-time (n=398, 53.9%) and with 46.35% of their work being done remotely. These participants were assessed on personal, demographic, and career-related variables via on online questionnaire. Objective career success was removed from the model for being uncorrelated to most variables. Mediation analysis showed that strategic career behaviors only fully mediated the relationships between desire for career control and perceived career control and that between perceived organizational support and subjective career success. These results are important for informing recommendations and career management strategies for organizations and individuals.

Keywords: *Strategic career behaviors, flexible working patterns, career management, European workers.*

1. Introduction

The recent Covid-19 pandemic led many individuals and organizations to adopt flexible working arrangements (Milasi, González-Vázquez, & Fernández-Macías, 2021). These changes have posed challenges for personal career management, with many finding remote work to negatively affect long-term career prospects and opportunities for advancement (Tavares, Santos, Diogo, & Ratten, 2020). Bloom, Liang, Roberts, and Ying (2015) suggested that remote work impairs advancement as it clashes with the belief that productivity means time spent on the job (as per Green, Tappin, & Bentley, 2020; Possenriede, Hassink, & Plantenga, 2014). This also affects the perception office-bound colleagues have of remote workers, in turn affecting the consistency of their performance (Baruch, 2000). Furthermore, without direct communication and social interaction with colleagues, remote workers may worry they are missing opportunities for mentorship and to develop an identity withing the company (Tavares et al., 2020; De Vries, Tummers, & Bekkers, 2019). Also, the autonomy expected means greater responsibility for defining roles and for managing long-term career (Raabe, Frese, & Beehr, 2007; Wrzesniewski, & Dutton, 2001). Hence, it is of particular importance to understand the specific challenges for those in remote work (Satici, Saricali, Satici, & Griffiths, 2020).

2. Aim, method and instruments

The present work extends a preliminary study that investigated strategic career behaviors (SCB) in a sample of Iberian remote workers using the Kaleidoscopic Career Model (KCM; Mainiero & Sullivan, 2006) as the central factor in a larger model (Figure 1, left). The KCM (15 items) is composed of three SCB: authenticity (moving one's career in alignment with personal values); balance (allocating time and energy between career and non-career duties); and challenge (seeking challenges and opportunities for growth and career advancement). The antecedents in the broader model were perceived self-efficacy (PSE; Kossek, Roberts, Fisher, & DeMarr, 1998; 11 items), desire for career control (DCC; King, 2000; 7 items), perceived organizational support (POS; Eisenberger et al., 1986; 11 items), and the consequences were perceived career control (PCC; Kuijpers & Scheerens, 2006; 5 items), objective career success (OCS; Whitely, Dougherty, & Dreher, 1991; measured using percentage of salary increase [%SI] and number of promotions [PRO] in the previous 6 years), subjective career success (SCS; Briscoe et al., 2021; 20 item [importance]) and career satisfaction (SAT; Briscoe et al., 2021; 20 items [achievement]). All factors except OCS were measure on 5-point Likert-type scales. These were

chosen as previous studies showed links between SCB and various career and personal aims (Desrosiers, 2001; King, 2000; Kossek et al., 1998; Lau & Pang, 2000; Lent & Brown, 2006; Raabe et al., 2007; Sturges, Guest, Conway, & Davey, 2002). However, previous research has been pairwise, and findings generally focus on traditional office settings, and has not investigate the interaction of these factors among remote workers. While the preliminary study did focus on remote workers, it was limited to those in Spain and Portugal.

Therefore, the present study aims to investigate these interactions among remote workers in a wider European population and used a questionnaire assessing factors in the model and personal, employment and sociodemographic variables. This study is part of a wider project funded through FCT – *Fundação para a Ciência e Tecnologia*, I.P. under the EXPL/PSI-GER/0321/2021 project – *EURECA: New career strategies for new European remote careers*. This was reviewed and approved by the CRC-W (Catholic Research Centre for Psychological, Family and Social Wellbeing) Review Board. Participants were informed of all procedures and data were collected online in June 2022.

3. Participants

The sample consisted of 739 employees, mostly male (N=442, 59.8%), single (N=499, 67.5%) with no children (639, 86.5%), with a mean age of 27.64 years (SD=8.48; Range=[18, 70]), working mostly full-time (N=398, 53.9%) and with 46.35% of their work done remotely. The majority worked in small (1-25 employees: N=250, 33.8%; <250 employees: N=204, 27.6%), private organizations (N=550, 74.4%) in the following industries: media, cultural, graphical (N=108, 14.6%); mechanical and electrical engineering (N=82, 11.1%); commerce (N=80, 10.8%); education (N=71, 9.6%); health care and social assistance services (N=71, 9.6%); and financial services (N=64, 8.7%). The majority were on salaries of less than 1500€/month (<1000€: 42.2% [N=312]; 1000–1499€: 28.6% [N=211]), had seen, on average, a 13.549% (SD=26.414%, [-100, 100], N=707) increase in their salaries), and had received, on average 0.94 (SD=1.263, [0, 10], N=738) promotions over the previous 6-year period. The participants' education levels showed 37.1% (N=274) had completed secondary education only, while 40.7% (N=301) and 20.8% (N=154) had completed up to a bachelor's or master's, respectively.

4. Analysis and results

Table 1. Relationships between Antecedents and Consequences of Strategic Career Behaviors.

a. ***Correlations*** **p<.05 **p<.01 *** p<.001*

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. PSE	—							
2. DCC	.254***	—						
3. POS	.228***	.052	—					
4. SCB	.348***	.437***	.120**	—				
5. PCC	.541***	.251***	.258***	.435***	—			
6. SCS	.355***	.593***	.092*	.587***	.355***	—		
7. SAT	.366***	.256***	.307***	.361***	.458***	.428***	—	
8. OCS (%SI)	.092*	.085*	.097*	.033	.057	.073	.108**	—
9. OCS (PRO)	.106**	.029	.085*	.053	.135***	.059	.158***	.224***

b. ***Regressions (expected paths only)***

IV	*DV*	*B*	*SE(B)*	*β*	R^2	R^2 *adj.*	*t*	*p*
PSE	SCB *(path a)*	.511	.051	.348	.121	.120	14.823	<.001
—	DCC *(path e)*	.130	.018	.254	.065	.063	7.139	<.001
—	SCS *(path f)*	.555	.054	.355	.126	.125	10.322	<.001
DCC	SCB *(path b)*	.1.261	.096	.437	.191	.190	13.179	<.001
POS	SCB *(path c)*	.218	.066	.120	.014	.013	3.287	.001
—	PSE *(path d)*	.282	.044	.228	.052	.051	6.362	<.001
—	SAT *(path g)*	.766	.088	.307	.094	.093	8.745	<.001
SCB	PCC *(path h)*	.186	.014	.435	.189	.188	13.111	<.001
—	SCS *(path i)*	.623	.032	.587	.345	.344	19.692	<.001
—	SAT *(path j)*	.496	.047	.361	.130	.129	10.495	<.001
PCC	SAT *(path l)*	1.474	.105	.458	.210	.209	13.981	<.001
SCS	PCC *(path m)*	.143	.014	.355	.126	.125	10.299	<.001
—	SAT *(path n)*	.554	.043	.428	.183	.182	12.845	<.001

c. **Outcome:** ***Strategic Career Behaviors (SCB)***

R	*R-sq*	*MSE*	*F*	*df1*	*df2*	*p*
.503	.253	8.00	82.791	3	735	<.001

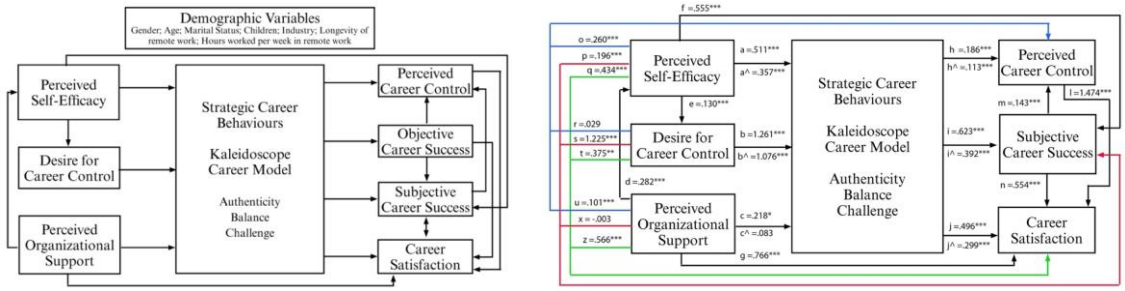
Main model	*Coeff (B)*	*se*	*t*	*p*	*LLCI*	*ULCI*
PSE *(path a^)*	.357	.050	7.173	<.001	.259	.454
DCC *(path b^)*	1.076	.095	11.302	<.001	.889	1.263

Note. n= 738;
Confidence for all CIs in output: 95.0000

No of bootstrap samples for

POS *(path c^)*		.083	.059	1.388	.166	-.034	.199				percentile bootstrap confidence intervals: 5000
d. Outcome: Perceived Career Control (PCC; Blue paths, Figure 1, right)											
R	*R-sq*	*MSE*	*F*	*df1*	*df2*	*p*					
.615	.379	3.12	111.789	4	734	<.001		*Indirect effects on PCC*			
Main model		*Coeff (B)*	*se*	*t*	*p*	*LLCI*	*ULCI*	*Effect*	*SE*	*LLCI*	*ULCI*
PSE *(path o)*		.260	.020	12.953	<.001	.220	.299	.0613	.0097	.0432	.0813
DCC *(path r)*		.029	.040	.722	.470	-.050	.108	.2164	.0278	.1647	.2745
POS *(path u)*		.101	.023	4.347	<.001	.055	.146	.0382	.0126	.0146	.0642
SCB *(path h^)*		.113	.014	7.879	<.001	.142	.435				
e. Outcome: Subjective Career Success (SCS; Red paths, Figure 1, right)											
R	*R-sq*	*MSE*	*F*	*df1*	*df2*	*p*					
.760	.498	6.96	182.186	4	734	<.001		*Indirect effects on SCS*			
Main model		*Coeff (B)*	*se*	*t*	*p*	*LLCI*	*ULCI*	*Effect*	*SE*	*LLCI*	*ULCI*
PSE *(path p)*		.196	.045	4.385	<.001	.108	.284	.2862	.0035	.2210	.3530
DCC *(path s)*		1.225	.090	13.647	<.001	1.049	1.401	.5429	.0569	.4378	.6588
POS *(path x)*		-.003	.052	-.064	.949	-.105	.098	.1354	.0443	.0496	.2241
SCB *(path i^)*		.392	.032	12.203	<.001	.329	.455				
f. Outcome: Career Satisfaction (SAT; Green paths, Figure 1, right)											
R	*R-sq*	*MSE*	*F*	*df1*	*df2*	*p*					
.501	.251	11.027	61.356	4	734	<.001		*Indirect effects on SAT*			
Main model		*Coeff (B)*	*se*	*t*	*p*	*LLCI*	*ULCI*	*Effect*	*SE*	*LLCI*	*ULCI*
PSE *(path q)*		.434	.071	6.122	<.001	.295	.573	.1866	.0321	.1264	.2519
DCC *(path t)*		.375	.142	2.638	.009	.096	.654	.5333	.0802	.3849	.7005
POS *(path z)*		.566	.082	6.895	<.001	.405	.727	.0986	.0342	.0328	.1685
SCB *(path j^)*		.299	.051	5.884	<.001	.199	.399				

Figure 1. Conceptual Model using the Kaleidoscope Career Model and its Antecedents and Consequences on Remote Workers (left); Analyzed Unstandardized Coefficients of the Career Management Model (right).



**p<.05, **p<.01, ***p<.001*

Pearson correlation analysis was conducted using *SPSS* (IBM, Version 28) between all factors in the model. Results (Table 1.a) indicated that OCS was not related to most variables or SCB and was hence removed from the model. However, correlations were found between all other variables except DCC and POS. Many of these were in contrast to the preliminary study, as was the direction of the correlation between PSE and DCC. This much broader set of correlations allowed for a deeper investigation into the predictive and mediating effects of SCB. Direct regression analyses (Table 1.b) were conducted between correlated factors. All were significant, including those not expected in the model: PSE to PCC (B[SE] =.340[.019], β =.541, R^2adj. =.292, t =17.479, p <.001); PSE to SAT (B[SE] =.740[.069], β =.366, R^2adj. =.133, t =10.675, p <.001); DCC to PCC (B[SE] =.310[.044], β =.251, R^2adj. =.062, t =7.048, p <.001); DCC to SCS (B[SE] =1.817[.091], β =.593, R^2adj. =.351, t =19.983, p <.001); DCC to SAT (B[SE] =1.016[.141], β =.256, R^2adj. =.064, t =7.183, p <.001); POS to PCC (B[SE] =.200[.028], β =.258, R^2adj. =.065, t =7.235, p <.001); and POS to SCS (B[SE] =.178[.071], β =.092, R^2adj. =.007, t =2.512, p =.012). Many of these were not found in the preliminary study and, contrarily, PSE *positively* predicted SCB. The antecedents combined explained 25.3% of the variance in SCB (Table 1.c), with PSE and DCC, but not POS, being good predictors, suggesting the POS to SCB relationship may be mediated by PSE and DCC. As the direct regression paths were significant, analysis using PROCESS model 4 (Hayes, 2013) tested these paths as mediated by SCB (Table 1.d-f). All three models were significant. PSE and POS were significant predictors of PCC and had significant indirect effects. This shows that SCB only partially mediate the relationships from PSE to PCC and POS to PCC. DCC was not a significant predictor of PCC in the presence of SCB, but had a significant indirect effect, suggesting the weak relationship is mediated by SCB. For SCS, DCC and PSE were significant predictors and had significant indirect effects in the presence of SCB, showing that SCB only partially mediate the PSE to SCS (*path f*) and DCC to SCS paths. POS was not a significant predictor of SCS in the presence

of SCB but had a significant indirect effect, suggesting the very weak POS to SCS relationship is mediated by SCB. For SAT, all antecedents were significant predictors and had significant indirect effects in the presence of SCB, showing that SCB partially mediate the PSE to SAT, DCC to SAT, and POS to SAT (*path g*) relationships.

5. Discussion and conclusion

The present study aimed to analyze the antecedents and consequences of SCB among European remote workers. Results showed that POS predicted PSE and SAT (*paths d, g*), suggesting that feeling supported by one's organization leads individuals to adopt a positive view of their skills and abilities. This link is crucial for remote workers, as higher self-efficacy motivation towards challenging tasks in the remote environment (King, 2000; Kossek et al., 1998; Raabe et al., 2007; Van Vianen, De Pater, & Preenen, 2008). Feeling supported by one's organization is also an important factor in one's well-being (Desrosiers, 2001), which helps to explain the present results showing an effect of POS on SAT (*path g)*. PSE also predicts DCC (*path e*). This finding aligns with King (2000, 2004), who argued that perceived self-efficacy increases when career control leads to good outcomes, which in turn increases the desire for more career control. Individually, PSE, DCC and POS all predicted SCB (*paths a-c*). However, the effect of POS on SCB becomes insignificant in the presence of PSE and DCC (Table 1.c). This may be a result of the locus of agency in the variables. PSE and DCC regard personal, internal agency, whereas POS regards the perception of what is being received from an external agent. Alternatively, regardless of the level of organizational support perceived, any effect of POS on SCB may be moderated by the importance one places on receiving organizational support for subsequently engaging in SCB. Also, there were significant direct effects of POS on PCC and SAT (Table 1.b), and a significant indirect effect on SCS (Table 1.e). These findings combined with the former suggest that PSE and DCC may mediate the effects of POS on SCB and on the consequent variables. PSE predicted SAT, but accounted for less variance than in the preliminary study. This is likely due to the different measure of career satisfaction (Greenhaus, Callanan, & Godshalk, 1990 *vs.* achievement score from Briscoe et al., 2021). PSE also predicted SCS (*path f*), in line with previous support for a link between self-efficacy and job performance and motivation (King, 2000; Tannenbaum, Mathieu, Salas, & Cannon-Bowers, 1991), which can contribute to SCS (Heslin, 2005). In mediation with SCB, PSE remained a significant predictor of SAT, but also had significant indirect effects, suggesting SCB are only partial mediators. Only the relationship between DCC and PCC and that between POS and SCS were fully mediated by SCB. The former suggests that turning a desire for control into a sense of control requires taking specific action. The latter suggests that the role feeling supported by one's organization has in how successful one feels relies heavily on whether one takes action to develop a career. For the other relationships, results suggested SCB were only partial mediators. For PSE, feeling efficacious may suffice to feel successful, satisfied or in control of one's career, regardless of any action taken to develop it. Indeed, PSE related negatively to SCB in the preliminary study, suggesting feeling efficacious reduces the need for SCB. It is possible that SCB do not play a central, or that KCM in that central role needs further investigation. The sample may also be a factor, as most were unmarried, had no children, and were relatively young. Also, a third resided in Portugal, a quarter in Poland, and a quarter in Italy, Spain and Greece, and a large proportion received low salaries. Hence, the findings may result from lower salaries and/or southern European cultures. These various factors may need further investigation. As remote-working becomes more prominent, it remains important to understand the factors affecting these careers in order to find ways to support individuals in managing their own. This research will inform recommendations and career management strategies for organizations and individuals, taking account of differences in national cultures, individual goals and beliefs about success.

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