

IMPACT OF PROTEAN CAREER ATTITUDE ON EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT: EVIDENCE FROM AUDITING FIRMS

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Abstract

Protean career has gained particular attention in contemporary career era. Constructs of protean careers have notified career theory for years. Especially in Sri Lankan context the research on protean career attitude is not adequate as per the review of literature. The current study attempts to examine the impact of protean career attitude on employee engagement among the audit service employees in the Northern Province. The scales related to protean career attitudes measure self-directed behavior and values-driven career attitude. For the purpose of this study, 105 employees of audit firms were selected. Regression analysis was employed to test the hypotheses. The results revealed that self-directed behaviour has a positive impact on employee engagement whereas values-driven career attitude doesn't significantly influence employee engagement. The results of the study give an insight that, to promote employee engagement, managers should facilitate for employees self-directed career behavior.

Key words: Protean career attitude, employee engagement, audit firms

Introduction

Nature of careers has been changed dramatically over the years. Today's organizations face pressures from globalization, mergers, acquisition, technological advancements, outsourcing and downsizing, and have forced the career environment to change from traditional careers to contemporary careers. The promise of long-term relationship between employees and organization has reduced. In the contemporary career era, employees are engaging in self-management activities to pursue personal career goals. This change in career attitude leads the employees towards career development. Besides plenty of researches conducted to assist organizations and employees, the reason behind this study is to investigate how protean career attitude affects the employee engagement of the employees toward organization. Researchers suggested that protean career attitude is the suitable coping trait to the current uncertain career scenario (Gottman et al., 1998). In the previous researches it has been declared that the protean talents are proactive and supposed to be less engaged to their organization.

D. T. Hall introduced the adjective "protean" to careers in 1976. It refers to a career orientation in which an individual is responsible, where the person's core values motivate career decisions, and the main criteria for his/ her success is subjective (Hall, 2004). Protean career attitudes allow individuals to rely on their own values to guide their career (value-driven), and play an independent role in managing their work behaviour (self-directed) with flexibility (Lichtenthaler & Fischbach, 2015).

Protean career involves exercise of self-direction and intrinsic values in achieving psychological success. An individual aspires to self-directed in his/her career choice and steered by intrinsic values (Hall, 2002).

According to Briscoe et al (2006), protean career attitude involves self-direction and values orientation. Protean career involves a psychological contract between employer and employee and it stresses loyalty on both sides of the contract. The employer doesn't guarantee employment but provide opportunities to employees, and employees don't assure loyalty but commit to high performance.

Though there are a number of literature available to understand the protean career, in the Sri Lankan context, there is no research conducted in auditing sector regarding the protean career attitude of the employees and its impact on employee engagement. It is crucial to investigate how protean career attitudes have impact on the employee engagement and work-related outcomes.

The main objective of the study is to investigate the impact of protean career attitude on employee engagement of employees of audit firms in the Northern Province of Sri Lanka. Audit firms in Sri Lanka have employed a very large number of people. As employees are valuable assets of the firms, increased attention must be paid to protean career attitudes in order for the employees to excel engagement in their job and to provide efficient service to the clients. In addition, the study of protean career attitude and its impact on the level of engagement of employees is a contemporary topic.

Research Problem

This study aims to find out how employee engagement is influenced by protean career attitude. Gallup, in its latest global workforce report revealed that 85% of the employees worldwide are not engaged or actively disengaged in their job (Gallup Consulting, 2013). Gallup also revealed that 14% of employees in Sri Lanka are engaged, 62% are not engaged, and 23% are actively disengaged (Gallup Consulting, 2013). This apparent engagement leads to the question what makes employees engaged. There are researches on employee engagement in accounting firms in various other countries (e.g. Johnson & Pike, 2018; Demerouti et al., 2010; Soane et al., 2012), however, in Sri Lanka, there are very few evidences (e.g. Welmilla & Ranasinghe, 2020; Weeratunga, 2020).

Auditing sector is the most developing and promising sector in Sri Lanka. Many job seekers actively seeking employment opportunities in audit firms. Mostly the students who are following professional courses are seeking training in audit firms. Audit firms are providing the path for career progression and giving the chance to the trainees to enhance their knowledge by working in different industries. There are number of researches available regarding employee engagement with corresponding independent variables in auditing context, but protean career attitude still remains untouched. The common problem revealed in auditing sector is poor employee engagement. Northern region job seekers are highly attracted to the name of "audit firms" and where the actual workers are under high pressure, running for deadlines, mentally and physically drained and doing their jobs for the sake of their training agreements and for gaining knowledge and experience.

Admitting the fact that small proportion of employees are actively engaged to their work, this present study identifies the problem of engagement of employees who have protean career attitude by considering value-driven career attitude and self-directed career behaviour of employees working in audit firms.

The research question formulated in this study is:

Does protean career attitude impact employee engagement?

Literature Review

Protean career attitude

Protean career attitudes imply that an individual struggles towards development and self-fulfillment in career (Volmer & Spurk, 2011). Protean career could be defined as a career in which an individual is value-driven and self-directed. Value-driven means that the person's internal values guide his/her career and provide measure of his/her career success; self-direction means having the ability to be adaptive in terms of performance (Briscoe et al., 2006). An individual who doesn't possess protean career attitude is more likely to seek external direction in managing his/her career as opposed to being proactive and independent (Briscoe et al., 2006). People with protean career attitude would be value-driven as they shape the career according to their values as opposed to organization's values, and they are self-directed as they pursue their career based on their personal career goals (Volmer & Spurk, 2011).

Traditionally, people relied on the organizations to take responsibility for their career. In a protean career, individuals are self-directed and take a proactive role in managing their own career. Protean career attitude is associated with proactivity, career adaptability and coping with uncertainty. It leads to positive outcomes such as job satisfaction, career satisfaction and life satisfaction (Sultana & Malik, 2019). For a person with protean career attitude, the criterion for career success is psychological one, not external one. Due to the issues of diversity in career, organizations with a clear competitive advantage are utilizing diverse and complex workforce by providing career learning opportunities for all employees to be successful in complex and turbulent environment. Nowadays, organizations are adapting new protean career contract to retain employees. The two dimensions of protean career attitude include values-driven career attitude and self-directed career behaviour.

Values driven career attitude: According to Briscoe et al (2006), a person who has protean career orientation is highly values-driven and thus he/she chooses to express his/her values through his/her career choices. The person shapes the career as per his/her own values rather than organization's values. The protean career involves the extent to which a person demonstrates values-driven career orientation (Briscoe et al; 2006). People with low level of values-driven characteristics would be dependent and never follow their own principles to manage their career themselves (Lichtenthaler & Fishbach, 2015). These people

Self-directed career behavior: Briscoe et al (2006) has mentioned that protean career is a career mindset that reflects protean talents towards self-direction in personal career progression. They noted that the individuals who are high in self-directed behavior focus on self-management regarding their career and give more importance to their own employability. Self-directed behaviour refers to self-reliance and proactive approach in managing the career by developing career goals and searching opportunities (Lichtenthaler & Fishbach, 2015).

Employee engagement

Employees devote most of their time at their workplaces in a day. It is important for an employer to make the environment favorable to employees in order to improve their performance and also to increase organizational efficiency. Perrin's Global Workforce Study uses the definition of employee engagement "employees' willingness to help their organization succeed by providing discretionary effort on a sustainable basis". Employee engagement is affected by emotional and rational factors related to work and work experience (Yousif Ali & Ali Hasaballah, 2020).

Engagement has been defined as “an energetic state of involvement with personally fulfilling activities that promote a person’s sense of professional efficacy” (Maslach & Leiter, 2008, p. 498). According to Harter, Schmidt and Hayes (2002), engagement is a person’s involvement and satisfaction with work and enthusiasm for work”. It is also defined as “distinct and unique construct that consists of cognitive, emotional, and behavioral components that are associated with role performance” (Saks, 2006, p. 602).

Career attitude and employee engagement

Gaining competitive advantage through the effective management of human resources has become a challenging one to the organizations due to the globalization and technological changes. Employees try to have more control of their own career development rather than by their employer (Baruch, 2006). Despite the multitude of concepts that have sought to explain contemporary careers, only two concepts namely the protean and boundaryless career concepts have become widely acknowledged. The protean career mainly focuses on a person’s motives to follow a self-defined career path (Redondo et al., 2021).

The protean career mainly focuses on a person’s motives to follow a particular self-defined career path (Redondo et al., 2021). Sahu (2016) surveyed 444 executives from Indian chemical industries and reported that self-directed career attitude significantly impact work engagement. He also found that the impact of value driven career attitude doesn’t impact work engagement whereas psychological mindset career attitude negatively impact engagement. Segers et al (2008) reported that self-directed career attitude supports for engaging employees. According to them, an employee will put more effort towards fulfillment of motives by high level of engagement behaviour at workplace. Another study by Briscoe et al (2012) revealed that protean and boundaryless career attitudes correlate differently with work outcomes. They found that boundaryless career attitude negatively associated with psychological wellbeing of employees while protean career attitude positively associated with the psychological well-being. From this, it can be said that career attitude will influence work engagement differently.

However, there are very few studies available in the literature to understand the association between the dimensions of protean career attitudes and employee engagement. Hence, the current study examines the relationship among the variables.

Methodology

Conceptual framework

Based on the literature review, the proposed connections between the constructs are shown in the conceptual model given in Figure 1.

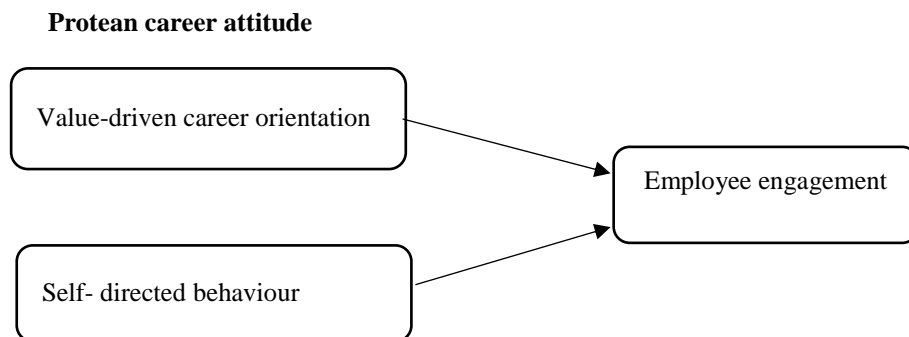


Figure 1: Conceptual model

Hypotheses

The following hypotheses were formulated in this study.

H1: Self-directed career attitude has significant influence on employee engagement.

H2: Values-driven career attitude has significant influence on employee engagement

Research population and sample

The research population for this study comprised of the employees of Audit firms in the Northern Province of Sri Lanka. The sample size in this study was 75 respondents who are working in the audit firms, in the Northern Province, Sri Lanka. The respondents were the representative sample of the employees in the Audit industry of the Northern Province, Sri Lanka. Convenience sampling method was used due to the restricting factors like time, cost, distance, and crisis situations prevailing due to pandemic.

Instruments

This study adopted reliable and valid measurement scales were adopted to measure the constructs. The questionnaire was originally constructed in English. The statements were measured by responses on a Five-point Likert scale of agreement with statements, ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5).

To measure the protean career attitude, the instrument developed by Briscoe et al (2006) was used. It is a 14 item questionnaire to measure the two dimensions of protean career attitude namely value - driven attitude (8 items) and self-directed behavior (6 items). Sample items include “I navigate my own career, based on my personal priorities, as opposed to my employer’s priorities” and “In the past I have sided with my own values when the company has asked me to do something I don’t agree with” (value - driven attitude); “When development opportunities have not been offered by my company, I’ve sought them out on my own” and “I am in charge of my own career” (self-directed behavior).

To measure employee engagement, the questionnaire developed by Saks (2006) was used. Saks (2006) developed two 6 item questionnaires to measure job engagement and organization engagement of employees. Sample item for job engagement includes “Sometimes I am so into my job that I lose track of time” and for organization engagement, “One of the most exciting things for me is getting involved with things happening in this organization.”

Data analysis

The data analysis was performed using SPSS 23.0 software.

Table 1: Summary of age group distribution of research sample

		Frequency	Percent
Age group	Below 25	23	30.7
	25-35	47	62.7
	Above 35	05	6.6
Gender	Male	25	33.3
	Female	50	66.7
Position	Trainee Associate 1	43	57.3
	Trainee Associate 2	22	29.3

	Audit Senior	7	9.3
	Audit Manager	3	4.0
Experience	Less than 6 months	21	28.0
	6 months to 1 year	11	14.7
	1 - 2 years	22	29.3
	More than 2 years	21	28.0
Educational qualification	Secondary	2	2.7
	Diploma	5	6.7
	Degree	55	73.3
	Post Graduate	6	8.0
	Others	7	9.3

Source: Survey data, 2021

The Table 1 depicts the summary of age distribution. It shows majority of the respondents fall into the age group of 25 – 35 which constitute 69.3% and 30.7% were aged below 25. The table shows that 66.7% of the participants are female staff and 33.3% are male staff. In terms of current position of the sample, 57.3% of the participants are in the category of Trainee Associate I and 29.3% of the respondents are Trainee Associate 2. The remaining staffs are in the category of Audit Senior (9.3%) and Audit Manager (4%). Work experience was grouped under four categories, where 28% of the respondents have experience of less than 6 months, 29.3% of the participants having 1 - 2 years of experience, 28% are with more than 2 years of experience while 14.7% of them having 6 months - 1 year experience. The sample of this survey consists a greater proportion of degree holders representing 73.3%. 8% of them qualified with post graduate qualifications and 6.7% with diploma. 2.7% of them qualified with secondary education and 9.3% with other qualifications.

Reliability test

The reliability test was performed to ensure consistency of the items measuring the variables using Cronbach's alpha. Nunally (1978) recommends that the value of Cronbach's alpha should be greater than 0.70, indicating strong internal data quality. Although Cronbach Alpha is deemed appropriate at 0.6 and above in emerging markets (Burgess & Steenkamp, 2006). The respective Cronbach Alpha values of the subscales of the current study are depicted in Table 2. As shown in Table 2, the Cronbach's alpha of the constructs ranges from 0.747 to 0.938. It indicates that there is internal consistency among the items within each dimension.

Table 2: Cronbach's Alpha

Dimension	No of items	Cronbach's Alpha Value
Protean career attitude		
Self-directed behavior	6	0.938
Values-driven	8	0.832
Employee engagement		
Job engagement	6	0.747
Organization engagement	6	0.789

Source: Survey data, 2021

Analysis

The data analysis was performed using SPSS 23.0. Descriptive statistics were used to describe the characteristics of the data in a study. It consists of mean, standard deviation and variance.

Table 3: Descriptive statistics

	Mean	Std. Deviation	Variance
Self-directed behavior	3.63	1.088	1.183
Value driven	3.56	.990	.979
Employee engagement	3.59	1.067	1.138

Source: Survey data, 2021

The descriptive statistics portrayed in Table 3 shows the values of range of mean, standard deviation and variance of independent and dependent variables. Among these independent and dependent variables, self-directed behavior construct shows the high mean value (3.63) whereas value-driven construct shows the lowest mean value (3.56).

Table 4: Correlation analysis

	1	2	3
1. Self-directed behavior	-	.900**	.925**
Sig.		.000	.000
2. Value-driven		-	.888**
Sig.			.000
3. Employee engagement			-

Source: Survey data, 2021

Table 4 reveals that the protean career attitude dimensions named self-directed behaviour and value-driven attitude have positive and significant correlation with employee engagement. From the correlation values, it can be stated that the relationship between these variables are very strong.

Table 5: Regression model of independent variables and employee engagement

Model Summary				
Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.939 ^a	.882	.875	.377

a. Predictors: (Constant), Self-Directed Behavior, Value Driven behaviour

Source: Survey data, 2021

The Table 5 shows the explanatory power of this model which is denoted by adjusted R square. The independent variable explained 88.2% of the variations in dependent variable. It showed that protean career attitude explained 88.2% of the variation in employee engagement.

The analysis of variance results in Table 6 indicates that the model fit is significant at 0.05 significance levels (F=130.241, p = .000).

Table 6: Analysis of Variance (ANOVA)

ANOVA ^a					
Model	Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Regression	74.215	4	18.554	130.241	.000 ^b
1 Residual	9.972	70	.142		
Total	84.187	74			

a. Dependent Variable: Employee_Engagement

b. Predictors: (Constant), Self-Directed Behavior, Value Driven

Source: Survey data, 2021

Table 7: Regression results

Model	Coefficients ^a						
	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	T	Sig.	Collinearity Statistics	
	B	Std. Error	Beta			Tolerance	VIF
(Constant)	-.116	.191		-.606	.546		
1 Self-directed career behavior	.624	.094	.636	6.638	.000	.184	5.430
Values-driven career attitude	.186	.129	.172	1.439	.155	.118	8.490

a. Dependent Variable : Employee_engagement

Source: Survey data, 2021

The regression results shown in Table 7 indicates that self-directed career behavior has a significant positive impact on employee engagement ($\beta = 0.624$, $p < 0.01$ level). Based on the results, hypothesis 1 was supported. At the same time values-driven career attitude had no significant impact on employee engagement ($\beta = 0.186$, $p = .155$). Hence the hypothesis 2 was not supported.

Table 8: Status of hypotheses

Hypothesis	Results of regression	Status
H1: Self-directed career attitude has significant influence on employee engagement.	$\beta = 0.624$, $p = .000$	Supported
H2: Values-driven career attitude has significant influence on employee engagement.	$\beta = 0.186$, $p = .155$	Not supported

Discussion

The present study explored the impact of the protean career attitude of employees in the audit firms and their engagement. The findings of the study revealed that self-directed career attitude has positive impact on employee engagement. The finding is consistent with the studies conducted by Sahu (2016) and Segers et al (2008). When an employee express self-directed career behaviors, he/she would be highly engaged with his/her job. Çakmak-Otluoğlu (2012) pointed out that self-directed career behaviour is positively related to organizational commitment. Individuals who are high in self-directed career management take an independent role in managing their vocational behaviors and are responsible for their success or failure in their careers (Briscoe et al., 2006).

The regression analysis also indicated that values-driven career attitude doesn't significantly influence employee engagement. Nishanthi and Kailasapathy (2018) found that values-driven career orientation is insignificant with organizational commitment. But the evidence of the influence of values-driven attitude on employee engagement is unfortunately lacking in the literature.

Contributions of this study

This study makes a number of contributions to the research on protean career attitude. Broadly, the research contributes to generating knowledge in relation to the impact of protean career attitude on employee engagement in the auditing sector which was not adequately investigated. Although protean career attitude construct has been extensively studied in the academic literature, its impact on employee engagement has been less discussed. The present study fills the research gap by examining the relationship between protean career attitude and employee engagement. Past research studied protean career attitude other sectors, but less investigated in audit firms, accounting firms and similar services. Hence, the inclusion of protean career attitude, and its discussion in audit firms is a considerable theoretical contribution of the present study.

With the completion of this study knowledge gap that was found within the literature was addressed. One of the aspects of the research identified that there is little evidence on how the protean career attitudes contribute to employee engagement. The most important implication of this study is to help the managers to simply avoid stereotyping employees based on their career attitudes. This provides reassurance to managers who fear about investing in individuals with protean career attitudes. These results assist HR practitioners to develop appropriate strategies that maximize the professional development of employees by navigating the changing context of the contemporary workplace by discovering the nature of the new career concept.

Most of the studies on the association between protean career and employee engagement have been conducted in the Western countries. But, the studies on these phenomenon are very rare in the developing countries such as Sri Lanka. The current study adds the body of literature on protean career concept. The findings of this study are likely to have implications for practitioners. Through the understanding of self-directed behaviour dimension of protean career attitude, employee development could be facilitated. The results of this study would help the employers of auditing sector, HR practitioners and managers to formulate policies to increase employee engagement through enhancing self-directed career behaviour among employees.

Limitations and suggestions for future research

As with all studies, there are limitations in this study too. These limitations need to be acknowledged. The information gained from the employees of the auditing sector made it possible to generalize the findings to the auditing sector. The study may not be generalized to other industries since the occupational groups are

different. This study was conducted in evidence of audit firm employees in Northern Province. Future researches can be conducted on various sectors with more samples. In addition, researcher also recommends to analyze more on contemporary career areas like protean career as they remain untouched. Further, employee engagement can be further studied with the independent variables other than protean career attitude, for instance, protean talents, boundary less career, etc. In reviewing the results of the study, it was identified that values driven behavior didn't contribute to employee engagement in audit firms. This is mainly due to relying on one sector and thus future studies could focus on comprehensive research with a more precise and wide population and sample which would enable a more thorough discussion that would increase the generalizability of findings.

Conclusion

This study aimed to examine the influence of protean career attitude on employee engagement among the employees of Audit firms in the Northern Province of Sri Lanka. A quantitative survey method was used to achieve the objective of the study. The study highlights the importance of protean career attitude. The study confirmed that the self-directed behavior of protean career attitudes have an impact on employee engagement in audit firms in the Northern Province. Employees who can able to execute their self-directed behaviors into their work place requirements will be able to strive in this dynamic context and adjust according to their organizations as well their own expectations. We hope that this study finding will contribute to the audit firms to promote employee engagement by enhancing self-directed career behaviour of employees. With this study researcher was able to provide novel insights into the protean career literature by validating findings obtained from the quantitative method. Finally, the researcher was able to provide strong implication to the little evidence available in the career literature with contradictory arguments.

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