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### Protean Orientation- Implications of Skewing from Mainstream Career

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**Received: 17.02.2021**

**Revised: 19.02.2021**

**Accepted: 24.02.2021**

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#### ABSTRACT

**Problem:**As the knowledge intensive career domains observe a paradigm shift in the direction of self- driven career choice, it is imperative to decode such mental orientations which exude stark implications for business organizations. The desire to steer one’s own career that matches the Generation Y employees’ self- identity, self- interest, autonomy needs and stewardship towards achieving a quality work- life balance is what constitutes a ‘protean’ mental orientation. This is usually observed as a deviation from the mainstream career. However, this orientation cascades both positive and negative implications for the employees as well as the organizations harboring them.

**Objective:** This conceptual paper aims to decode the implications of skewing from the mainstream career for employees who exhibit protean orientation.

**Design/ Methodology:** The exploratory nature of the paper uses qualitative research (combination of conceptual framework analysis and grounded theory) to draw inferences by employing systematic search data mining techniques on various secondary sources of data. The inferential technique employed for arriving at conclusion is inductive in nature.

**Findings & Conclusion:** At a time when Generation Y employees are constantly fatigued by series of identity changes and when job security and vertical success are losing their sheen, the Human Resource department needs to take cognizance of such protean orientation. The findings of the paper suggest that psychologically

rewarding career is a key concern for employees so that they can perform optimally and exude organizational commitment. Any misfit in the mental contract between organization & employee could possibly lead to improper alignment thereby enhancing attrition rate. The paper holds promise for recruitment psychologists, HR professionals, job enthusiasts, strategic tankers and decision leaders to discern protean orientation & draw maximum mileage out of it for organizational and employee benefit.

**Keywords:**1Attrition,2 Generation Y,3 Organizational commitment,4 Protean Orientation, Work- life balance

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## **1.0 Research objective**

To identify the implications of skewing from mainstream career for employees exhibiting protean orientation.

## **2.0 introduction**

On the stage of global employment, the meaning and essence of career has observed a paradigm shift. Even the knowledge intensive career domains are ready to cross boundaries through their self- driven destinies. This mind set is paving way to the genesis of protean orientation in which employee's internal values like adaptability and freedom are considered as the self- directed perspectives (Hall, 2004). As employee contribute to the economic development of the organization, there are a cohort of them who are actually so self- driven that they do not like to be directed by the organization. Instead, they believe in steering their own career development and yield profitable results (Crant, 2000; King 2004). Such set of employees tend to be highly ambitious and possess immense expectations in context to their career orientations. The main criteria of people having protean career is different from the mainstream employees. Their success indices are subjective in nature rather than being objective and are largely driven by the employee's own needs. Employees exert full independence in moving from the organizational based career to individually steered career based on their self- identity. They typically identify their career success based on a combination of self- values, self- interest, autonomy and attitude towards work which synergistically reflect a balance between life and work. This can be seen as a deviation or toss from the mainstream career orientations (Derr, 1986 as observed in Agarwala, 2008).

## **3.0 literature review**

### **3.1 Meaning and Genesis of Protean Orientation**

In the words of Briscoe and Hall as stated in 2004, 'Protean' is derived from the Greek word 'Proteus' which characterizes a Greek myth in which 'Proteus' has a characteristic property of changing shapes in order to avert any threats and dangers. As per Hall (1976), such sort of protean careers are neither driven nor managed by the organizational firm. Rather, it is managed by the individual himself. Willingness to take part in development interventions and stimulation of development behavior are a part and parcel of employee's focus (Greenhaus&Sklarew, 1987). Every individual at work has some career goal in mind and these goals encompass skill development, salary increments and vertical promotions (Noe, 1996, Zicik&Klehe, 2006).

These are evidences proving that individuals with stronger vision for career development & goals achieve greater degree of success (De Vos&Soens, 2008). Individuals with greater career focus are better motivated towards accomplishing their career goals and therefore exhibit enhanced career stewardship. They utilize their value- driven and self- directed attitudes to fulfill their aspirations (Briscoe & Hall, 2006). These self-directed attitudes propel them to autonomously steer their career goals leading to the genesis of protean career orientation. Individuals with such an orientation have their parameters for designing success and often pursue unique goals (Briscoe et al, 2006). Sugalski and Greenhaus, 1986 have stated two imperative functions of goal focus. They are:

- (i) Satisfaction with career progression
- (ii) Career goal attainment

Self- driven employees put in the best of their efforts to achieve their career goals and therefore have better chances of getting success in their chosen career fields (Arthur et al, 2005).

### **3.2 Elements of Protean Career**

For having a self- driven career, the individual needs to develop his protean orientation. This protean orientation is said to be a function of individual's self- direction and the set of values he attaches in approaching a specific career development (Briscoe, Hall & Demuth, 2006). This can be translated into three elements as stated under-

Element 1- Employee is the driver of his career and not his organization.

Element 2- Career decision making of the employee is driven by his personal values.

Element 3- Personal definition of success is individually variable and employee steers his own definition of success.

### **3.3 Characteristics of Protean Career**

Protean orientation derives its value from two foci namely (i) Growth and (ii) Freedom (Hall, 2004). This orientation exhibits the following characteristics:

- Goal of employability supersedes job security.
- Employee experiences continuous learning and he encounters a series of identity changes.
- Vertical success appears irrelevant and taken over by psychological success.
- Training programs are not the only source of development; the employee seeks work challenges as more imperative for career development.
- More impetus on developing self- knowledge and adaptability via application of meta-skills.
- Psychological contracting with oneself and one's own work is emphasized over work based contracting with the organization.

- Involves autonomy, dynamism, self- direction and self- invention (Hall, 2004, Pg. 04)

**3.4 Models of Career Concepts**

S.No.	Model	Propounded by	Year	Brief Description
1	Kaleidoscope Career Model	Sullivan, Forret, Carraher and Mainiero	2009	Entails decision making via employees by laying impetus on factors such as: (a) Balance- in which employee strives at maintaining a work- life balance. (b) Authenticity- in which there is a commensuration between internal values and extrinsic manifestation of those values through behavior (c) Challenge- it entails the keen desire to manage antagonistic effects of responsibility and autonomy.
2	Academic Career Model	Baruch & Hall	2004	Entailed the following dimensions with respect to career development and progression: (a) Flat organization structure (b) Availability of cross organizational moves (c) Availability of learning structures including sabbaticals

**3.5 Notions of Protean Orientation**

Protean careers when carefully handled can yield rewarding benefits for both organization and employees. With an increased organizational commitment and reduced turnover intentions, this concept holds potential to boost both employees and organizational performance (Gubler, Arnold & Coombs, 2013). A sense of self-reflection could possibly come handy in this (Briscoe et al, 2006) who developed a test to decode the magnitude of protean orientation in employees. As per Briscoe et al (2006), there is a need to understand three kinds of needs (with respect to protean orientation)-

Need	Need Type	Brief Description
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Need 1	Need for Self- direction	In which employee wants his career direction to be in his san of control.
Need 2	Need for choosing alternative career paths	In which employee looks for career opportunities with/ without organizational support.
Need 3	Need for collaborating values with career & job	In which the employee observes whether his personal values override job demands or vice- versa or they exist in the same plane.

#### 4.0 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

**Paper Category:** Conceptual paper

**Research Design:** Exploratory

**Type of Analysis:** Qualitative analysis

**Kind of Qualitative Analysis:** A combination of Conceptual Framework Analysis (The literature was divided into vital frames for the ease of understanding various dimensions of the topic) and Grounded theory approach was employed to draw inferences.

**Deduction Mechanism:** Inductive mechanism

**Data Mining Technique:** Systematic search employing specific key words pertinent to the topic into consideration.

**Data Sources:** Secondary data repositories

#### 5.0 FINDINGS

The review of literature subjected to conceptual framework analysis suggest that protean orientation has both positive and negative implications as discussed under-

- **Positive Implications:** Due to employee’s self- awareness of his potentialities & interest, he looks for more rewarding career and is therefore geared towards taking new career decisions that keeps him content. This satisfaction permits the employee to put up his best in the chosen career field and imparts such development opportunities that the employee can cherish for a life-time.
- **Negative Implications:** An urge for a protean career could possibly arise due to a basic misfit between organization and personal goals. In such instances either
  - (i) The organization does not grant autonomy to its employee or
  - (ii) Firm’s HR practices do not support the concept of a self- directed career development or
  - (iii) Improper alignment between organization and individual goal setting is observed leading to dissatisfaction for both the parties.

The same can be depicted via conceptual flowchart in Fig.1

## 6.0 CONCLUSION

It can be rightly deduced that protean orientations are moderated by self- awareness and self- directedness and is a direct function of satisfaction. Generation Y employees are molded in an environment that is extremely dynamic and meandering in career progression is more a matter of choice for them. This choice is often observed as a hallmark of versatility and an all- rounder attitude. A protean career attitude interjects flexibility, adaptability and adjustment in this extremely volatile business scenario. Boundary less employees are often less likely to be committed to their organizations for the simple reason that their super-ordinate goals give them greater satisfaction than the organizational goals. The cohort of employees belonging to Generation Y are often observed as more self- directed and driven by personal values falling in line with protean career attitudes. They are even ready to give away their traditional corporate careers to follow a profession that deems more fulfilling to them. Protean orientations have both positive and negative implications. If dealt positively, it can yield rewarding benefits to organizational & individual performance with an equivocal focus on organizational commitment. If negatively observed, it can increase attrition rates because it leads to employee dissatisfaction. Therefore, the essence of delving into protean career orientation lies in the fact that it can give an insight into several aspects of Human Resource Management (HRM) like job design and subsequently establishing a better organizational fit between organization and employee.

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