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## Proactive coping as a kind of creative adaptation to a new workplace

### Streszczenie:

Proaktywny wymiar zachowań ludzi zakorzeniony jest w ich potrzebie wpływania i kontrolowania otoczenia. Człowiek woli bowiem podejmować aktywne i twórcze działanie niż tylko przeciwdziałać. Dynamika rynku pracy wymaga od jednostki większej samodzielności i proaktywności. Zachodzące zmiany generują zapotrzebowanie na łatwo „adaptujących się” pracowników. Celem podjętych badań było zatem zbadanie proaktywnego radzenia sobie pracowników w nowym miejscu pracy oraz osiągniętych przez nich wyników adaptacyjnych, jak odczuwany dobrostan. Badaniami objęci zostali nowo zatrudnieni pracownicy ( $N=172$ ), którzy wyrazili zgodę na udział w potrójnym pomiarze (pretest i podwójny posttest) w przeciągu pierwszych sześciu miesięcy w nowym miejscu zatrudnienia. Użyte wyniki wskazały związek proaktywnego radzenia sobie z mniejszymi kosztami emocjonalnymi. Dodatkowo, wyniki wskazały na moderujący efekt statusu sprzed zatrudnienia (pracujący-bezrobotny) na badaną relację.

### Słowa kluczowe:

proaktywne radzenie sobie, adaptacja, koszty emocjonalne, nowi pracownicy

### Abstract:

The proactive dimension of human behavior is rooted in one's need to create and control the environment. Individuals prefer to do things actively and creatively rather than being counteractive. The dynamics of the job market demand that individuals are increasingly independent and proactive, can easily adapt to change, and create their own future. This way of understanding a newcomer's activity corresponds to proactive coping. The main goal of this study was to investigate the role of proactive coping of workers in a new workplace and in job adaptation outcomes, namely well-being. Data was collected from newly employed workers ( $N = 172$ ) who agreed to participate in the study within a longitudinal evaluation design (one pre-test and a double post-test) during their first six months in a new workplace. Overall, the study demonstrates that proactive coping improves the adaptation of new employees, costing them less emotionally as they adjust to their new workplace. Additionally, the employees' pre-entry experience (previously unemployed *vs* previously employed) moderated the relation between the analyzed variables.

### Keywords:

proactive coping, job adaptation, emotional costs, new employees

## Introduction

Dynamic environments and ongoing changes require specific skills of employees (Frese, 2008; Belschak, Den Hartog & Fay, 2010). In particular, today's employees should easily adjust to change, be tolerant of uncertainty, and anticipate forthcoming tasks. Since career paths have become much less linear and bound to a specific organization, employees are becoming responsible for their own professional development as suggested by protean career concepts (Gubler, Arnold & Coombs, 2014; Hall, 2004; Stoltz, Wolff, Monroe, Mazahreh & Farris, 2013). Accordingly, organizational behavior is characterized by an expanded set of professional responsibilities and contains adaptive performance and proactivity (Griffin, Neal & Parker, 2007). One of the consequences of recent organizational trends is an decrease in job security (Probst & Lawler, 2005), as the policy of lifelong employment has changed into a market-oriented economy that implies subsequent changes of workplace during one's occupational life. In these days, individuals will change jobs approximately 10 times over 20 years (Bauer & Erdogan, 2011). Job mobility is increasing, especially among younger employees, who enter a new organization approximately every second year (European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions, 2006). Thus, effective adaptation to a new workplace is now becoming a crucial issue. Managing the individual's entrance into organization is becoming a major task. Contrary to earlier research, newcomers have recently been conceptualized as active participants engaging in an individual adaptation process characterized by patterns of proactivity (Morrison, 1993, Chan & Schmitt, 2000; DeVos, DeClippeleer & Dewilde, 2009). In the entrance phase, when a person has to achieve successful entry and settle down in the organization, one's individual actions, such as seeking information, planning, and problem-solving, is more important, rather than organizational actions such as supervisory feedback or counseling (Super, Hall, 1978; Savickas, 1997). This way of understanding a newcomer's activity corresponds to the proactive coping approach (Schwarzer & Taubert, 2002).

As entering a new organization is a considerable source of stress (Ellis, Nifadkar, Bauer & Erdogan, 2015), the importance of proactive coping increases. Coping is traditionally described as reactive behavior focused on dealing with already occurred stressful events (Lazarus & Folkman 1984; Albion, Fernie & Burton, 2005). In particular, the individual is oriented towards the compensation of loss or harm in the past. During organizational entry, however, it is not sufficient to simply react to cues from the environment, but rather new workers need to plan ahead and prepare themselves for future changes, threats or opportunities by taking the initiative themselves (Mensmann & Frese, 2017). Although reactive coping with a situation that has already occurred seems to be reasonable when facing different situations at work, proactive coping should be more useful at the new workplace. This "in advance" activity helps in being competitive and effec-

tive as well as fostering adaptation to the new workplace. Although future risks and demands are acknowledged, they are appraised as a challenge, rather than as a threat, harm, or loss (Greenglass, 2002; Schwarzer & Taubert, 2002; Greenglass & Fiksenbaum, 2009). Accordingly, an effective proactive copier is able to gather different resources and skills, e.g. planning, organizational skills, social support, which allow him to be prepared to manage any entrance stressors that he encounters (Saks & Ashforth, 2000).

Recent research indicates the importance of proactivity in understanding employees' behaviors (Seibert, Kraimer & Crant, 2001; Frese, 2008). Aspinwall and Taylor (1997), described proactive coping as a particularly effective strategy for managing work demands. Although research in the past showed positive affect as promoting proactive behaviors in an organization, the role of negative emotions seems to be more complex (e.g. Cangiano, Bindl & Parker, 2017). Negative moods at work might generate employees' activity, e.g. change-oriented behavior, and stimulate a person to use personal initiative to obtain a personal goal. Thus, an employee might change the environment by quitting the job, but might also try to craft their own job (Parker & Collins, 2010). On the contrary, proactive behaviors could have an impact on employees' well-being. Previous research has shown that proactivity positively influences adaptation outcomes, such as job performance and job satisfaction (Seibert et al., 2001; Wanberg & Kammeyer-Mueller, 2000). One of the indicators of workplace adaptation that is assumed in this study is the emotional cost experienced by new employees. All the emotional conditions explored in the workplace contribute to the emotional cost: the uncertainties of flexibility, the lack of trust and commitment, the superficiality of teamwork. Thus, proactive coping might play a crucial role in the adaptation process by reducing the negative aspects of the transition from an organizational outsider towards an organizational insider, and in fact might lead to positive adaptation outcomes. Strauss and Parker (2014) mentioned proactive behavior as generating positive emotions through the fulfillment of one's psychological needs, e.g. challenging goals and self-initiated behaviors facilitate the experience of being competent and self-efficient rather than being directed by someone else. Thus, proactive behaviors at work might generate positive affective experience by minimizing the emotional costs experienced during the entrance phase (cf. hypothesis 1).

Hypothesis 1: Proactive coping would have a negative effect on the level of emotional costs experienced by the employee during the adaptation process.

It is likely that an individual's past experience in obtaining full-time work versus being unemployed has an impact on their transition process into a new workplace. Bauer and colleagues (2007) outlined pre-entry status as an important factor promoting adaptation outcomes of new employees (school-leavers vs. job changers) Moreover, some studies (Bańka & Wołowska, 2006; Grdinovac & Yancey, 2012) underlined that a higher threat

of job loss, the unemployment rate and unstable environments lead employees to for example lower their intention to leave. Previously unemployed newcomers might be less likely to leave a new workplace, since the negative sides of being without work might influence their perception of their current job. From the perspective of potential costs, being employed is assessed as better than leaving the organization, although the appearing discrepancy that emerges between expectations and the current workplace could lead to negative emotional consequences (e.g. Cangiano, Bindl & Parker, 2017).

Entering a new organization is often accompanied by some degree of disorientation, reality shock, and a need to make sense of the new environment (Bauer & Erdogan, 2011; Van Maanen & Schein, 1979). Since unemployment influences a person in a specific manner, the adaptation process could be particularly difficult for newcomers who were previously unemployed. Different studies on unemployment (Feather & O'Brien, 1986; Paul & Moser, 2009) have shown that unemployment causes undesirable psychological consequences like a decrease in mental health or self-esteem and shifts towards an external locus of control. Thus, the experience of unemployment might lead to a decrease in perceived competence as well as to a real loss of skills. Additionally, the longer individuals have been without a job, the more likely they are to suffer from a lack of time structure and purpose (Rowley & Feather, 1987). Moreover, stereotypes of the unemployed which exist in society could force them to accept a job offer which does not really fit their abilities, qualifications and interests. The gap between the current and a desired job can generate negative emotions at work (in: Cangiano, Bindl & Parker, 2017). Since newcomers' pre-entry experience can influence adaptation outcomes, e.g. previously unemployed newcomers might experience a greater reality shock and have lower efficacy beliefs about their own ability to achieve positive adaptation outcomes, it is assumed that pre-entry experience would be associated with the emotional costs experienced by new employees (*cf.* Hypothesis 2).

Hypothesis 2: Newcomers' pre-entry experience is associated with the emotional costs experienced in the new workplace

As was mentioned above, the entrance phase into a new organization can result in some negative states, e.g. disorientation, reality shock, and a sense of insecurity that could generate maladaptive behaviors and outcomes. Since adaptive behaviors involve newcomers responding to unexpected and new circumstances (Pulakos, Arad, Donovan & Plamondon, 2000), higher proactive coping should lead to better adaptation outcomes. This paper assumed proactive coping as an appropriate way of dealing with the entrants' stress and decreasing the emotional costs experienced in a new workplace. New employees who are higher in proactive coping become better prepared to prevent or deal with stressors that emerge, as well as becoming able to reconsider their situation during their entrance into a new organization.

Since newcomers' pre-entry experiences can influence adaptation outcomes, e.g. negative emotions experienced in the new workplace, the effects of proactive coping might be less clear than it was assumed in the previous section. For example, previously unemployed newcomers might experience a higher reality shock and have lower efficacy beliefs about their own ability to achieve positive adaptation outcomes, which might decrease the effect of proactive coping compared to job changers. Therefore, it is assumed that pre-entry status is related to the emotional costs of the new employees irrespectively of their level of proactive coping (cf. Hypothesis 3).

Hypothesis 3: The effect of proactive coping on emotional costs is moderated by pre-entry experience.

## **Materials and Methods**

**Proactive coping.** Proactive coping was assessed using the 14-item proactive coping subscale of the Proactive Coping Inventory (Polish version of PCI; Pasikowski, Sęk, Greenglass, & Taubert, 2002; Cronbach's  $\alpha = .87$ ). A sample item is "When I experience a problem, I take the initiative in resolving it." The participants answered each item on a 4-point rating scale (never-always). Higher scores indicate a higher level of proactive coping.

**Emotional costs.** Emotional costs were assessed using 14 items referring to negative feelings at work (e.g., a sense of insecurity, disappointment, and inferiority; Chudzicka-Czupała, 2010; Cronbach's  $\alpha = .92$ ). Participants answered each item on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (*not at all*) to 5 (*very often*). Higher scores indicate a higher level of emotional costs.

**Control variables.** The questionnaires included age, gender and pre-entry experience (participants were asked whether they were unemployed, students or employed before getting their current job) at time 1. Since the sample does not contain any former students, the pre-entry status was dummy-coded with 0 (*previously employed*) and 1 (*previously unemployed*).

## **Procedure**

The data for this study comes from a larger research project on proactive coping among new employees. The participants in this study were recruited from among the newly hired employees of three electronic retail stores. The sample was 59% women, and the mean age was  $M = 31.47$  ( $SD = 9.53$ ). Concerning their pre-entry status, 45% of participants were previously unemployed, and the average length of unemployment before getting

their current job was 7.82 months ( $SD = 6.04$ ), which classified them as short-term unemployed.

Every newcomer received the questionnaires either directly after signing the job agreement or within the first two weeks of employment. The surveys were collected after two weeks. Only participants who returned completed questionnaires were eligible to take part in the study.

Data was repeatedly collected within a longitudinal design consisting of three waves. The first data collection was at the time of entry into the organization (pre-test,  $N = 172$ ). The second data collection was conducted three months later (post-test;  $N = 119$ ), and finally, data was collected at the six month point (follow-up,  $N = 99$ ). At stage 1, all participants received questionnaires to measure proactive coping and the adaptation outcome (emotional costs). The same questionnaire was administered to all participants at stage 2 and time 3. The time duration of three months between measurements was chosen for reasons that were both theoretical (e.g., this time frame allowed for the observation of the longer-term consequences of the coping behaviors reported in the pre-test, cf. Wanberg, 1997) and practical (e.g., to maintain the engagement of respondents and to reach all participants at the same workplace, since data was collected anonymously). The completion of questionnaires for the pre-test and post-test surveys was done on a voluntary basis; no monetary compensation or other incentives were provided which may have improved the participants' response rate. Although the survey was confidential, participants were invited to record an anonymous ID (e.g. nick name) so that individual responses could be matched over time.

The constructs were assessed at the three different stages. Accordingly, the multi-level models for longitudinal data were computed, with the particular wave on Level 1 and the subjects on Level 2 (Singer & Willett, 2003). To control for changes over time, the linear and quadratic effects of time were considered. Mixed models naturally handle uneven spacing of repeated measurements and can also be extended to non-normal outcomes (see: Maxwell, Delaney & Kelley, 2017). Proactive coping was considered as a predictor. Since the questionnaires were answered three times, proactive coping was repeatedly assessed and thus can vary between the waves (Level 1). Therefore, the proactive coping was centered (within-person centering, see Curran & Bauer, 2011; Singer & Willett, 2003).

## Results

Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics of the study variables: proactive coping and emotional costs, including all three waves. In the following, it was tested whether proactive coping influences one of the adaptation outcomes, namely emotional costs. Furthermore, the effect of both proactive coping and pre-entry experience were addressed with regard to the emotional costs experienced in the new workplace.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics of the study variables

	M	SD	Min	Max	Skewness (Std.Error)	Kurtosis (Std.Error)	N
Proactive coping T1	1.88	.45	.57	2.93	-.44 (.24)	.53 (.48)	172
Proactive coping T2	1.94	.50	.36	3.00	-.16 (.24)	.24 (.48)	119
Proactive coping T3	1.88	.52	.29	3.0	-.13 (.24)	.29 (.48)	99
Emotional Costs T1	.60	.56	0	2.29	.43 (.24)	-1.04 (.48)	172
Emotional Costs T2	.68	.59	0	2.36	1.05 (.24)	.16 (.48)	119
Emotional Costs T3	.73	.55	0	3.07	1.23 (.24)	2.52 (.48)	99

Table 2 shows the results of a linear mixed model predicting the change in emotional costs over time. In Model 1a, gender, age, and pre-entry experience have been included as control variables yielding no significant effects on emotional costs, besides pre-entry experience,  $B = -1.28$ ,  $p < .01$  (Model 1c) and a marginally positive linear effect of time indicating that emotional costs increases over time,  $B = 0.14$ ,  $p < .10$  (Model 1b).

Table 2. Effects of proactive coping and pre-entry experience on emotional costs

	Emotional Costs		
	Model 1a	Model 1b	Model 1c
Fixed effects			
Level 1 (within-subjects)			
(Intercept)	1.54**	2.63**	2.05**
Time	0.09	0.14 <sup>+</sup>	0.13
Time x Time	-0.02	-0.04	-0.04
Proactive coping		-0.33**	-0.10
Proactive coping x pre-entry experience			-0.48**
Level 2 (between-subjects)			
Gender <sup>a</sup>	0.10	0.10	0.09
Age	0.01	-0.01	-0.01
Pre-entry experience <sup>b</sup>	-0.10	-0.12	-1.28**
Model fit			
Deviance	567.0	551.4	541.4
AIC	587.0	573.4	565.4
BIC	626.4	616.8	612.7

Notes. Only fixed effects are reported; coefficients are unstandardized; <sup>a</sup>Gender is dummy-coded (1 = male, 0 = female); <sup>b</sup>Pre-entry experience is dummy-coded (1 = previously unemployed, 0 = previously employed); <sup>+</sup>  $p < .10$ ; \*  $p < .05$ ; \*\*  $p < .01$ .

Hypothesis 1 assumes that proactive coping results in decreased emotional costs experienced by new employees. Accordingly, Model 1b includes proactive coping as a covariate at Level 1 (within-subjects), which describes the increase in proactive coping in the post-test and follow-up compared to the pre-test (within subjects). As can be seen in Model 1b, proactive coping (Level 1, within subjects) has a negative effect on emotional costs,  $B = -0.33, p < .01$ , thus the increase in proactive coping contributes to lower emotional costs. Consistent with previous expectations, participants with a higher level of proactive coping reported lower emotional costs experienced in the new workplace. This result confirms Hypothesis 1.

Hypothesis 2 further considers the relation between pre-entry experience and emotional costs. It was assumed that previously unemployed newcomers would report more emotional costs during the entry phase than job changers. Contrary to expectations, Model 1c outlines the negative effect of pre-entry status,  $B = -1.28, p < .01$ . Thus, previously unemployed entrants experienced lower emotional costs. Therefore, hypothesis 2 has not been confirmed.

Finally, Hypothesis 3 predicts that the effect of proactive coping (within subjects) on emotional costs is moderated by pre-entry experience. In fact, Model 1c outlines a negative interaction effect of proactive coping and pre-entry experience,  $B = -0.48, p < .01$ . Thus, proactive coping decreased emotional costs, especially among previously unemployed workers, confirming Hypothesis 3. With regard to the main effect of proactive coping on decreasing emotional costs,  $B = -0.33, p < .01$ , an increase in proactive coping leads to lower emotional costs for those participants who were previously unemployed, whereas for the previously employed participants (i.e. job changers) there is no such effect of proactive coping on emotional costs.

## Discussion

The results show the importance of proactive coping in the context of adaptation to a new workplace. The data analysis revealed that proactive coping was a predictor of one important adaptation outcome: lower emotional costs. Since emotional costs refer to the level of negative emotions experienced by new employees, these can be lowered through e.g. talking to co-workers about the job or seeking support and feedback (Ashford & Taylor, 1990). Proactive copers accumulate more personal and job-specific resources and are able to invest them efficiently to improve their own well-being in their work. This finding confirms the conceptual framework that assumed the positive effect of proactive coping, and particularly the increase in proactive coping within subject, on work adaptation, namely lower emotional costs experienced by new employees.



Further analysis depicts the opposite effect to the prior expectations of pre-entry experience on emotional costs. Specifically, it demonstrates that newcomers' tendency to cope in a proactive way leads to better outcomes: lower emotional costs, which is especially true for those participants who were previously unemployed. As Feather (1990) suggested, adverse effects of unemployment prompt individuals to search for work, but at the same time they reduce their efforts as the prospects of re-employment decrease. As a result, self-confidence about getting a job, efforts to seek employment and the need to get a job tended to be lower for individuals who are out of work (Feather & O'Brien, 1986). It was therefore expected that the unemployed might often have no other choice and might take the first job that is available to them as opposed to employed individuals, who have more opportunities to search for more suitable employment. However, the findings of the study showed lower emotional costs in organizational entrants with previous experience of unemployment compared with job changers. One of the possible explanations for the lower emotional costs experienced by previously unemployed newcomers could be seen in the job search process. Prior failures can reduce one's expectations about a future job, while employed individuals imagine a new workplace as better than their current one. Accordingly, repeated failure to get a job might lead to realistic expectations of a new workplace and this might further lead to higher satisfaction and positive feelings about the job available to them. Also, in their study Isaakson, Johansson, Bellaagh and Sjöberg (2004) indicated an increase in work centrality and consistently high levels of agreement with the norm that are found among the long-term unemployed. This suggests that people who were without a job evaluate a paid job more highly.

This study demonstrates the role of proactive coping in experiencing emotional costs during the first period of employment. The findings indicated that those newcomers who were more engaged in proactive behaviors experienced less negative emotions in their new job. This relation was significant, especially among previously unemployed entrants. Therefore the pre-entry status of the newcomers were analyzed further. Moderation analysis depicts the conditions under which proactive coping exerts its influence on emotional costs. The association between proactive coping and pre-entry status on new employees' emotional well-being have been further analyzed. Specifically, the status of being previously unemployed has been examined here as an important factor. The results showed an increase in proactive coping as leading to lower emotional costs, especially for those participants who were previously unemployed.

This study showed that proactive coping implies specific adaptation outcomes such as emotional cost experienced in a new workplace. However, the study has some limitations that should be considered when drawing conclusions on the present findings. First, the study was based on a relatively small sample of participants. However, it was initial-

ly possible to reach all the new employees of the particular company. Second, the study suffers from drop-out (58% of the response rate at wave 3). However, there was no possibility to look into the reasons for the drop – out rate because of anonymity of the study. Third, the study relies on self-report measures because of the interest in job adaptation from the perspective of the new employee . Future studies could complete the perceived job adaptation with an assessment from co-workers or a supervisor.

The current study both has practical implications and suggests directions for future research. The results revealed that the outcomes of the adaptation process were associated with employees' pre-entry status. Detailed knowledge about specific problems and consequences of newcomer integration should provide fruitful starting points for the development of specific treatments and recommendations for various groups of employees. Since proactive coping seems to an important factor leading to better adaptation into the new workplace, there is still a need to investigate organizational benefits and costs of newcomers' proactive coping behavior in more detail.

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