

## **Proactive and Committed: Characteristics for Retention**

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*The purposes of this study are to examine the relation between proactive personality and intention to leave a career and to test a boundary condition (i.e., career commitment) in which the effect does and does not hold. Participants consist of 1,527 full-time working adults from multiple organizations in the oil and gas industry. Results reveal a negative relation between proactive personality and intentions to leave a career that is moderated by career commitment. This finding suggests that career commitment may be an increasingly important construct to examine when considering various forms of turnover.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

In today's society there is a premium placed upon attracting and retaining individuals that are capable of adapting to the rapid pace of change in organizations and industries. Unlike the previous decades where jobs were characterized as highly defined and structured (Campbell, 2000), 21<sup>st</sup> century jobs require greater initiative due to the changing nature of jobs (Frese and Fay, 2001). Coupled with these changes has been the rise of contemporary career perspectives (e.g., protean, Hall and Mirvis, 1996; boundaryless, Arthur, 1994; Arthur and Rousseau, 1996) that focus heavily on the individual rather than the organization. Today's economic climate adds additional complexity. With many jobs being outsourced or otherwise becoming obsolete (i.e., advances in technology reduces the need for actual incumbents in a given job), incumbents voluntarily, and sometimes involuntarily, leave not only their current employers but their respective professions altogether. Taken together, there is a trend toward increased emphasis on identifying the "right" person to operate in such an evolving environment. Several authors suggest that proactive personality is precisely the personality trait that may allow individuals to flourish in this increasingly demanding, and changing, organizational environment (see Erdogan and Bauer, 2005; Fuller *et al.*, 2010; Fuller and Marler, 2009).

Bateman and Crant (1993) conceptualized proactive personality as individuals who are relatively unaffected by situational forces. Moreover, people with proactive personalities look for opportunities to

initiate change in their environment. Proactive personality has been related to positive career outcomes such as engagement (Dikkers *et al.*, 2010), performance (Crant, 1995; Thomas *et al.*, 2010), satisfaction (Thomas *et al.*, 2010), extrinsic (objective) and intrinsic (subjective) career success (Fuller and Marler, 2009; Seibert *et al.*, 1999), career management behaviors (Chiaburu *et al.*, 2006), affective organizational commitment (Thomas *et al.*, 2010), work adjustment (Kammeyer-Mueller and Wanberg, 2003), and creativity (Kim *et al.*, 2009). Despite speculation that proactive personality may, in fact, predict mobility, Briscoe *et al.* (2006) demonstrated that having a proactive personality did not predict changing jobs or employers frequently. The present study contends that because proactive people have greater intrinsic career success and become embedded in their careers, they are precisely the people that will *not* leave their profession. Specifically, this study seeks to test the relation between proactive personality and intention to leave their current profession. It also seeks to determine *when* proactive personality leads to positive outcomes (i.e., reduced withdrawal cognitions). Studies, with few exceptions (e.g., Erdogan and Bauer, 2005; Fuller *et al.*, 2010), have ignored moderators of proactive personality. Thus, this study tests the role of career commitment as a moderator of the proactive personality – intention to leave the profession relation. The present study proposes that people higher on proactive personality who also have strong career commitment will be the most dedicated and therefore the least likely to intend to leave their profession. In short, the purposes of this study are to first establish that people higher on proactive personality are less likely to leave their profession than people lower on proactive personality, and second, to provide a boundary condition (i.e., career commitment) in which this effect does and does not hold.

### **Proactive Personality and Career Change**

Proactive personality is rooted in social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1977) that suggests the person, environment, and behavior constantly influence one another. Over the past twenty years, there has been an increase in interest regarding proactive personality. Bateman and Crant (1993) proposed that proactive people are those who are capable of creating their own environment by demonstrating initiative and seizing opportunities often resulting in positive change. In sum, proactivity is about “making things happen” (Bindl and Parker, 2010). For instance, proactive people are likely to identify inefficient or ineffective aspects of the work environment and effect change. Whereas individuals who lack proactive personality (i.e., passives) are likely to take a reactive approach to their environment and subsist in current situations (Bateman and Crant, 1993). Perhaps, not surprisingly, a growing literature demonstrates that people with proactive personality attain high job performance (e.g., Fuller *et al.*, 2010; Thomas *et al.*, 2010) and career success (Fuller and Marler, 2009). A recent meta-analysis highlighted the positive relations between proactive personality and objective (e.g., salary, promotions) and subjective career success (e.g., job satisfaction, perceived career success), contest (e.g., job performance) and sponsored mobility (e.g., taking charge), as well as relationships with supervisor and employability (e.g., learning goal orientation; Fuller and Marler, 2009). Such comprehensive work undoubtedly demonstrates that proactive people are likely to experience greater work and life success than passive people. The specific behaviors that proactive people engage in include, for example, networking, career planning, accumulation of political knowledge, and high quality exchange relationships with supervisors. There is some debate regarding proactivity as being a stable tendency or a pattern of behaviors at work. In this research, the focus is on proactivity as being a stable disposition.

Despite these seemingly overwhelming positive outcomes of proactive personality, there has been speculation that proactive persons will be likely to leave their organizations or professions in their pursuit to create constructive change. Allen *et al.* (2005, p.982) suggested persons with proactive personality may “make changes, act to solve problems, and actively pursue possibilities that could advance their interests and careers” often that involve quitting. Crant (2000) also suggested that proactives may be less likely to adapt to less than ideal circumstances and therefore may seek to identify new circumstances that better accommodate their needs. Thus, there is some evidence that proactive personality is related to increased likelihood of both organizational and career turnover. In order to understand the rationale behind this suspicion, this study addresses the contemporary conceptualizations of careers.

A protean career has been conceptualized as the psychological success derived from individual career management determined by the interactive effects of two meta-competencies: self-awareness and adaptability (Hall, 2004). High self-awareness and adaptability result in pro-activity or “smart performance.” Ultimately, the protean career is defined by employability and a drive to learn (Briscoe *et al.* 2006; Hall and Mirvis, 1996). Similarly, boundaryless careers also emphasize proactivity, but directed more towards building and sustaining work-relationships across organizational boundaries. Although protean and boundaryless career attitudes arguably lend themselves toward greater employment mobility, the developers of these career conceptualizations have suggested that while mobility is an aspect of these contemporary careers, it does *not* have to be physical employment mobility (Briscoe *et al.*, 2006; Hall, 2004). For example, Briscoe *et al.*, (2006, p.32) suggested that “a person could embrace a boundaryless mindset, yet rely on one organization to develop and foster his or her career.” Thus, although proactivity is inherent to protean and boundaryless attitudes, it does not mean that a proactive person is constantly looking for (or taking) new job or career opportunities (Briscoe *et al.*, 2006). In effect, Briscoe *et al.* (2006) emphasized that proactivity is not synonymous with quitting.

In part to address this speculation, Briscoe *et al.* (2006) found a null effect on the relation between proactive people and job change, and proactive people and number of employers per year. The absence of a significant effect between mobility preference and affective commitment was also revealed by Briscoe and Finkelstein (2009) debunking the notion that proactives lack interest in committed employment relationships. And, interestingly, Fuller and Marler (2009, p.340) echoed this finding by demonstrating a correlation between people with proactive personality and organizational commitment, concluding “employers should not fear people with proactive personalities will necessarily exhibit cross-organizational mobility.” Along the lines of Fuller and Marler’s (2009) rationale, this study contends that proactive people’s behaviors and attitudes may, in fact, allow them to be increasingly engaged in their work and embedded in their organization and career. For example, proactives seek novel, challenging experiences so perhaps engaging in developmental work experiences fulfills that need. Similarly, proactives have high learning goal orientation so jobs that provide cross-functional training opportunities may again fill this desire. In sum, there is a growing body of research that contradicts earlier findings regarding the deleterious effect of proactivity on relevant organizational outcomes (e.g., organizational commitment, turnover).

Given that today’s work environment is “boundaryless,” Weick (1996) posited that employees are likely to have opportunities for “new beginnings” in their careers. Career change is an example of one such new beginning and has been defined in a variety of ways (i.e, intra-organizational change, cross-organizational change; Sullivan, 1999). The current research examines proactive personality and its influence on career change. Using the protean career perspective, this study posits that proactives may develop strong connections with a network of individuals related to the career that simply draw the proactive person closer to the profession rather than luring the individual elsewhere. Previous research has typically examined the relation between proactive personality and job change rather than career change. This study seeks to test the notion that proactive people are not always looking for career change, and in fact may be precisely the individuals who engage in opportunities and experiences that embed them in their organization and profession. Thus,

*Hypothesis 1: Proactive personality predicts intention to leave career such that individuals who are higher on proactive personality are less likely to intend to leave career than individuals who are low on proactive personality.*

### **Role of Career Commitment**

Commitment is considered to be attitudinal in form (Mowday *et al.*, 1979), defined by an enduring emotional attachment and alignment of goals (Cooper-Hakim and Viswesvaran, 2005). The general construct of commitment is very broad; however, it becomes more specific when considering its five foci: job, organization, work-group, career, and value-driven (Blau, 1989; Morrow and McElroy, 1986). Although organizational commitment is often the construct of interest in the literature, career commitment

may be increasingly important as employees are becoming more committed to their careers than to their respective organizations (Somers & Birnbaum, 2000). Blau (1985) conceptualized career commitment as an individual's attitude regarding his or her profession or vocation and a "willingness to remain present in one's career." Aryee and Tan (1992, p.289) further defined career commitment as the "...identification with a series of related jobs in a specific field of work that is behaviorally expressed in an ability to cope with disappointments in the pursuit of career goals." Previous research reveals a number of important outcomes associated with high levels of career commitment. For instance, high career commitment is related to high job satisfaction (Siu, 2002), performance, and career success (Mrayyan and Al-Faouri, 2008). Similarly, Jones and Whitmore (1995) found a positive relation between career commitment and promotions. Likewise, Day and Allen (2004) found a link between career commitment and performance. More relevant to the current research, career commitment has been shown to be negatively related to withdrawal intentions and turnover (Aryee & Tan, 1992; Blau, 1989). In effect, individuals who are low on career commitment may be motivated to seek a different type of career. Thus, there is clear evidence that career commitment is related to a number of positive outcomes.

This study proposes that when the role of career commitment is considered, there may be a change in the nature of the relation between proactive personality and intentions to leave. This study suggests that proactive people who are also committed to their careers will be the least likely to experience withdrawal cognitions. These people are likely the employees who demonstrate initiative and seek ways to improve their current organizational and professional environment, rather than seeking new or different careers. Where it is possible to see proactive people leaving, as suspected in the literature, is when they lack commitment to their career. Perhaps these individuals "fell" into their career at an early age, or given the growing orientation to boundaryless or protean careers, they are tempted to seek alternative paths. The proactive individuals who experience low levels of commitment to their career may seize external opportunities whereas proactive individuals with high levels of commitment may seek out internal opportunities for change. Therefore, it is important to consider career commitment in concert with proactive personality in order to more fully understand the type of employees that potentially experience withdrawal cognitions, and ultimately change in careers. Thus,

*Hypothesis 2: Career commitment moderates the relation between proactive personality and intention to leave career such that the negative relationship is strongest when career commitment is highest.*

## **METHOD**

### **Participants**

The final sample of participants consisted of 1,527 full-time working adults from multiple organizations in the oil and gas industry nationwide who were members of the American Association for Professional Landmen (AAPL). Participants were recruited for participation through their local association and were provided with a link to the online survey that was housed on the AAPL homepage. A landman (a term inclusive for both men and women) negotiates deals and trades with other companies and individuals, drafts contracts, acquires leases, and ensures compliance with governmental regulations. Landmen, in this sample, were full-time employees for large oil and gas companies (e.g., ExxonMobil, BP). The response rate for this study was approximately 22% (with a total of 1,527 complete responses) out of approximately 7,000 AAPL company landmen members.

The sample was predominantly male, 70% ( $n = 1,063$ ). Participants ranged from 20 to 91 years of age, with a median of 42 years of age. The majority of participants reported earning a bachelor's degree, 65% ( $n = 992$ ), and 10% reported earning a master's degree ( $n = 145$ ) and juris doctorate ( $n = 146$ ), respectively. Participants reported a wide range of experience ranging from six months to 51 years with a median of 18.5 years. Participants lived across the United States (i.e., New York, Pennsylvania, West Virginia, Alabama, Tennessee, Mississippi, Kentucky, Ohio, Indiana, Michigan, North Dakota, Montana,

Kansas, Louisiana, Arkansas, Oklahoma, Texas, Colorado, Wyoming, Utah, New Mexico, and California), but approximately half of participants (48%) were from Texas.

### **Procedure**

Participants who agreed to participate in the study clicked on a link to an online survey. The survey took approximately 15-20 minutes to complete. Participants answered a series of closed-ended items regarding perceptions and attitudes towards their current organization and career, as well as a series of questions related to demographic information.

### **Measures**

#### *Proactive Personality*

Proactive personality was measured using Bateman and Crant's (1993) scale. The proactive personality scale consists of 10-items that included, for example, "If I see something I don't like, I fix it." Participants responded on a five-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*) ( $\alpha = 0.85$ ).

#### *Career Commitment*

Career commitment was measured using eight items from Blau's (1985) scale. Sample items included: "I definitely want a career for myself in the Land Profession," "If I had all of the money I needed without working, I would probably still continue to work in the Land Profession," and "If I had it to do all over again, I would not choose to work in the Land Profession." Participants responded on a five-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*) ( $\alpha = 0.84$ ).

#### *Intention to Leave Career*

Intention to turnover was measured using three items based upon the research of Mobley *et al.* (1978) and Mobley *et al.* (1979). The items included: "I think about quitting the Land Profession," "I will actively look for a new Profession," and "I intend to change professions within the next five years." Participants responded on a five-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*) ( $\alpha = 0.81$ ).

#### *Covariates*

Because this study was interested in perceptions of career commitment and intentions to leave career, it was important to recognize that the sample's demographic composition may have affected the findings. Thus, to control potential confounds, participants' age, years of experience, and gender were utilized as covariates in the regression analysis.

## **RESULTS**

Overall scale means, standard deviations, and intercorrelations are reported in Table 1.

In order to test *Hypothesis 1*, age, years of experience, and gender were entered as controls in Step 1. Proactive personality was entered in Step 2. *Hypothesis 1*, individuals who are higher on proactive personality are less likely to intend to leave career than individuals who are low on proactive personality, was supported ( $\beta = -1.05$ ,  $\Delta R^2 = 0.01$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ). The results confirmed *Hypothesis 1* and suggested that proactive personality influences intention to leave the profession. Specifically, individuals who were higher on proactive personality reported reduced withdrawal cognitions relative to those individuals who were low on proactive personality.

**TABLE 1**  
**SCALE MEANS, STANDARD DEVIATIONS, AND INTERCORRELATIONS**

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4	5
1. Age	47.20	11.84	-				
2. Years of Experience	19.45	11.75	0.84**	-			
3. Gender (Male=1; Female=0)	0.70	0.46	0.02	0.09*	-		
4. Proactive Personality	3.78	0.50	-0.16**	-0.12**	0.00	-	
5. Career Commitment	3.80	0.65	0.05	0.04	0.02	0.26**	-
6. Intention to Leave Career	1.71	0.74	-0.02	0.03	-0.03	-0.10**	-0.66**

Note: \*= $p < 0.05$ ; \*\* =  $p < 0.01$ .

Moderated regression was used to test *Hypothesis 2* (Aiken and West, 1991). The controls in Step 1 included age, years of experience, and gender. In Step 2, the main effects were entered, proactive personality and career commitment; and, in Step 3, the interaction term of proactive personality X career commitment was entered. *Hypothesis 2*, career commitment moderates the relation between proactive personality and intention to turnover such that individuals who are higher on career commitment and proactive personality report reduced intention to leave career than individuals who are lower on career commitment, was supported ( $\beta = -0.05$ ,  $\Delta R^2 = 0.003$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ). See Table 2.

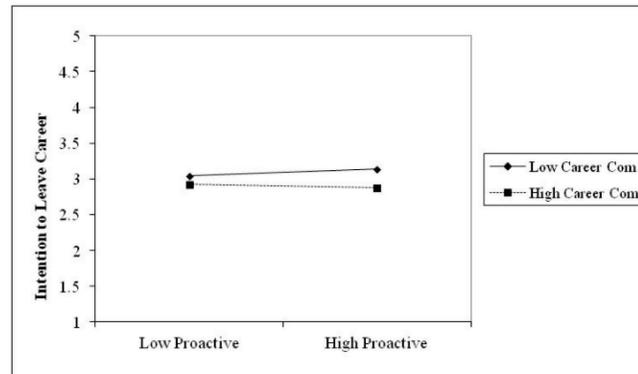
**TABLE 2**  
**MODERATED HIERARCHICAL REGRESSION ANALYSES**

	$\beta$	$\Delta R^2$
Step 1: Years of Experience Age Gender	-0.05 0.02 -0.03	0.002
Step 2: Proactive Personality Career Commitment	0.08** -0.69**	0.446**
Step 3: Proactive Personality x Career Commitment	-0.05*	0.003*
Overall $R^2$		0.451**

Note: \*= $p < 0.05$ ; \*\* =  $p < 0.01$ .

This finding suggests that there was a difference in intention to leave the profession based upon an individual's career commitment. Individuals who were higher on proactive personality and career commitment (i.e., dedicated to the Landman career) report lower intentions to leave career than individuals lower on career commitment. Thus, career commitment is a key variable when examining who experiences withdrawal cognitions. See Figure 1.

**FIGURE 1**  
**INTERACTION OF PROACTIVE PERSONALITY AND CAREER COMMITMENT ON INTENTION TO LEAVE CAREER**



## DISCUSSION

The current study sought to examine the relations between proactive personality, career commitment, and intentions to leave one's career. As expected, results reveal support for a strong relation between career commitment and intentions to leave one's career. Furthermore, the current study provides a test of the relation between proactive personality and intention to leave career as well as examines the extent to which career commitment influences this relation. This is the first study to address this relation, and suggests that the assumption that proactive people are more likely to seek new careers is incorrect. In fact, people with proactive personality (who are also high in career commitment) may be precisely the people who are likely to remain in their career. This study also examines the role of career commitment in this relation to determine when this effect may and may not hold. The present research suggests that low levels of career commitment attenuate the relationship between proactive personality and intentions to leave career. Conversely, high levels of career commitment strengthen the negative relation between proactive personality and withdrawal cognitions, enhancing the likelihood proactive people will remain in the current career. This is a potentially important finding as it has been assumed that commitment was not a factor in the extent to which proactive individuals change jobs. However, it is also important to note that regardless of degree of proactive personality, there is a significant and negative relation between career commitment and intentions to leave career. In effect, individuals who report greater commitment to their career are less likely to leave their careers than those who report lower levels of career commitment. This study contributes to what Briscoe *et al.* (2006) and Fuller and Marler (2009) suggested, which is that commitment may influence the attitudes and behaviors of proactive people. Motivational theories have suggested a number of ways for organizations to structure jobs in order to increase organizationally relevant constructs. However, there is little research that specifically examines how these theories may be used to influence career commitment, in general, and more specifically, for proactive individuals in particular. Future research needs to specifically address how employers can foster such career attitudes among their proactive employees.

## Implications

Even in the face of an economic slow-down, turnover remains costly to organizations. Given the tightening of budgets and, in many cases, the slashing of resources dedicated to recruitment, selecting employees who will not only perform, but also remain at the organization becomes increasingly important. From a selection perspective, one way to reduce turnover is to hire individuals who have "strong personality" traits, as these individuals are less likely to be influenced by situational factors

(Locke & Latham, 2004). Moreover, there are many “weak” situations in the workplace where personality likely influences behavior (Seibert *et al.*, 1999) therefore reinforcing the importance of hiring individuals with the “right” personality traits. The growing body of research on proactive personality, including this study, demonstrates that proactive people are the right people; they are likely to achieve job and career success and this study also shows that they are less likely to leave their career than passives. This study echoes the call by Briscoe and Finkelstein (2009) for employers to avoid stereotyping proactive people as “risky investments.” The current research demonstrates that proactive people may, in fact, be the safe investment, particularly when these individuals are committed to their career.

The findings suggest that career commitment may be an increasingly important construct to examine when considering various forms of turnover and therefore educating all individuals about a given profession may be more important than an organization offering a wide-array of opportunities or benefits to entice and retain employees. Perhaps professions should consider creating a selection process, of sorts, when it comes to helping individuals make career decisions that involve gathering of data, informational interviewing, and developing an in-depth understanding of what day-to-day life will be like in a specific career field. In addition, organizations might consider continuing education initiatives for employees that enable them to stay current in their respective fields thereby providing them with a deeper understanding of their career. In effect, professions should provide prospective workers with realistic career previews in order to ensure future workers have a full understanding of the opportunities that do and do not lie ahead. If there is, ultimately, lack of career commitment, people may leave the profession. Therefore, greater consideration may need to be given as to not only how employers compete to attract and retain talent, but also how professions compete to attract and retain talent.

Moving beyond the recruitment and selection phases, organizations may need to provide comprehensive career development opportunities in order to retain the proactive persons who are very career-oriented and committed to the careers. For example, Verbruggen *et al.* (2007) examined the relationship between organizational career management (i.e., practices concerned with the career development of employees such as a training course or career action plan) and external career counseling (i.e., counseling done independent of the employer), revealing a complex relationship. The authors’ suggested organizational career management partly led to employees’ seeking external career counseling through individual career management. In effect, employees who received career support from their employer were more satisfied with their career and less likely to seek external counseling. However, findings also revealed that organizational career management partly reduced the need to seek external career counseling due to enhanced career satisfaction of the employees. It can be argued that proactive individuals who are committed to their profession would likely be the individuals who receive organizational career management (i.e., career action plans) resulting in enhanced career satisfaction rather continuing to seek external career counseling. Similarly, Chiaburu *et al.* (2006) revealed that proactive personality positively predicted career self-management behaviors, mediated by career resilience. Therefore, organizations that offer career management and/or counseling may be able to appropriately satisfy and advise proactive people, ultimately resulting in the retention of these individuals. In summary, organizations may facilitate the retention of proactive people by creating organizational career management practices as well as internal career counseling.

### **Limitations**

In the present study, caution should be used when generalizing the findings. Although the sample consisted of working adults, it consisted of only one type of career – landman. Therefore, it is unclear whether these findings will translate to other careers. It should also be noted that the occupation of landman should be considered a career, as there is a professional orientation that takes into consideration their education, training, and professional associations. Blau (1985) makes a similar case in his study using a sample of nurses. Therefore, although the findings may generalize to other careers, it is important to replicate these findings in a more diversified sample of careers. A second limitation is that this study does not report actual turnover, only intentions to leave. Therefore, the comments related to actual departure from careers must be interpreted with caution, as these findings do not capture actual turnover.

The findings also cannot answer the question of whether people change careers or simply change organizations within their chosen profession. However, although withdrawal cognitions are an imperfect predictor of turnover, they are consistently found to be one of the best predictors (Griffeth *et al.*, 2000). Third, it is important to note that there is a significant correlation between career commitment and intention to leave career (-.66) which may be indicative of multicollinearity. Although the two variables (career commitment and intention to leave career) are correlated, they are different conceptually: career commitment is a variable that could vary according to state-based variables, such as pay in the career and opportunities to advance in this career, while the variable proactive personality should be more stable over time. Thus, although they are highly correlated, conceptually, they are fundamentally different. Finally, it is important to acknowledge that the response rate for this study was 20% which was lower than anticipated. Although this is a seemingly low response rate, current methodological reports indicate that the average response rate for online survey research is 30% (Marsden & Wright, 2010). Thus, keeping in mind this average response rate helps to reduce concerns over the response rate for the current research.

### **Future Research**

Future research should seek to replicate these findings in other career fields in order to demonstrate the validity of this study. It is important to demonstrate the reliability of this finding before fully accepting that proactive people are indeed less likely to leave than passives. Future research should also test the findings at the organizational level, rather than career level. Turnover research typically considers the job, or organizational level (Mobley, 1977). Given that there is a different set of referents for determining job versus career attitudes, it is important to test for differential effects in future studies. Future research should also explore the proposed mechanisms to reduce withdrawal cognitions. Engagement and embeddedness are the likely mechanisms for retaining people with proactive personality; however, this has not been tested. Broader models identifying the mediators of this relation could clarify why proactive people have reduced withdrawal cognitions. This is important for organizations, as it will help to clarify how organizations can foster such mechanisms that result in proactives remaining in the career.

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