

THE PROACTIVE PERSONALITY OF YOUNG WORKERS – WHAT ARE THE CHALLENGES FOR EMPLOYERS?

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Purpose: The main purpose of the study was to examine the proactive personality of young workers in Poland.

Design/methodology/approach: Data were collected from young workers using an e-questionnaire. The study followed the approach developed by Bateman and Crant. The U Mann-Whitney test was used in the data analysis. The study focused on identifying specific proactive behaviors of young workers.

Findings: Young employees with certain professional experience are characterized by highly proactive personality. The male employees showed higher overall levels of proactiveness than their female counterparts. In turn, the particular age of the young employees was not observed to affect their proactive attitudes. Gender-dependent statistical differences were observed in terms of some proactive behavior, which facilitated the formulation of specific recommendations for employers.

Research limitations/implications: The study was carried out only in Poland. In the future, the author plans to expand the scope of the study to include countries of varying cultural characteristics and allow international comparisons.

Practical implications: Employers are recommended to implement targeted efforts aimed at enhancing proactive employee behavior, particularly among female staff members. These should include the establishment of a proactive work environment and implementation of suitable HRM practices, e.g. in terms of proactiveness-focused career path planning and targeted employee development (individual and team coaching, mentoring, design thinking).

Originality/value: The study identifies the proactive personality of young employees and uses the obtained results to formulate recommendations for employers in terms of HRM management that duly accounts for the proactive personality of employees.

Keywords: proactive personality, young employees, HRM practices, employer.

Category of the paper: Research paper.

1. Introduction

To effectively function in a turbulent environment, an organization needs to continuously adapt to the evolving conditions and take advantage of opportunities as soon as they present themselves. To do so, however, it needs to recruit employees capable of coping with such challenges. Moreover, given the prognosed labor shortages and highly varied levels of respective employees' engagement, it is important that the organization holds on to staff members best suited to perform the tasks with which they are assigned. Ultimately, the organization's ability to face challenges will always depend on its employees' capacity to effectively make responsible decisions, which is why employees with proactive personality can be a valuable asset. Proactive personality, as a personal initiative construct, enriches the growing body of literature in the field of business, management, and psychology (Din et al., 2023).

A proactive personality is understood as an active approach to changes in one's environment (Krupski, 2007). Moreover, proactive individuals are able to adapt their work environment to their specific needs and abilities (Bateman et al., 1993). This is particularly important in the context of the current changes that necessitate constant adaptation of methods, tools, and performance approaches. However, leaders may regard employees' proactivity as a threat to their own work status (Sun et al., 2023). Hence, it is important to properly shape employee management practices in an organization with the above in mind. In turn, identification of the proactive personality in employees will facilitate better assignment of specific tasks and more effective planning of activities. This is really crucial because sustainable businesses go beyond mere regulatory compliance by proactively identifying and addressing sustainability challenges (Wolniak, Grebski, 2023a).

Even though there have been numerous publications on the characteristics of employees active in the job market, few have been focused specifically on the young workers currently entering the same, and none have considered the particular aspect of young workers' proactive personality. Given the above, we conducted the following literature review and empirical study exploring this particular area.

The main goal of the paper was to examine young Polish workers in terms of the proactive quality of their personality using the 17-item scale developed by Bateman and Crant (Bateman et al., 1993). With a view to achieving the above, the following research questions were considered:

RQ1: What is the level of proactivity personality in young workers?

RQ2: Are there any significant gender-related differences in terms of proactive behaviors of young workers?

Hypothesis 2.1. Proactive personality in young workers is significantly different for gender groups.

RQ3: Are there any significant age-related differences in terms of proactive behaviors of young workers?

Hypothesis 3.1. Proactive personality in young workers is significantly different for age groups.

The paper consists of 4 parts including introduction, literature review, methods, results, and summary and discussion.

2. Literature review

In a rapidly developing economy, knowledge can quickly become obsolete, and it is necessary to constantly be on the lookout for potentially more beneficial or efficient solutions. In this context, employees, and especially their “proactive personalities,” play an increasingly significant role. Said proactiveness is a determinant of proactive behavior displayed in a variety of areas. T.S. Bateman and J.M. Crant defined a proactive person as someone with a “relatively stable behavioral tendency” to initiate change in the environment (Bateman, Crant, 1993). Interest in this personality-based approach remains strong due to the fact that proactive individuals exhibit their proactiveness across multiple contexts and over time, regardless of the contingencies of a situation at work or in one’s career (Parker, 2016).

The literature review indicated two primary approaches to proactiveness. Some researchers define it as proactive personality (Bateman, Crant, 1993), i.e. the character of an individual who is relatively unconstrained by situational forces and able to scan for opportunities, show initiative, take action, and persevere until they achieve closure by bringing about change. In the alternative approach, it is defined as personal initiative, i.e., behavior independently engaged of one’s own volition (self-starting), proactive and lasting (Fay, Frese, 2001). However, as stressed by A. Bańka, the difference between a proactive personality and personal initiative is rather subtle, and both approaches agree on the key point that proactiveness is a certain predisposition dependent on personality-related factors (Bańka, 2015).

In literature, the concept of proactiveness has been analyzed from the individual, team, and organizational perspectives (Parker et al., 2006). By considering individual proactiveness, it is possible to identify proactive predispositions and behaviors in various areas of human activity. T. Bateman and J.M. Crant observed that proactive individuals tend to display seven interrelated traits, which prompted them to develop the Proactivity Personality Scale – PPS under this theoretical construct (Bateman, Crant, 1993). It is a unidimensional scale that allows researchers to measure the effects of proactiveness.

There are many benefits that hiring of proactive individuals can yield for organizations. The outcomes that are most frequently studied in terms of proactive personality can be grouped into three categories: employee attitudes, job behaviors/performance, and career-related

outcomes (Parker, 2016). A growing empirical literature demonstrates that proactive behaviors can increase well-being (Zambianchi, Ricci Bitti, 2014). Empirical studies also show that managerial personality traits that particularly facilitate building positive interpersonal relationships include a conciliatory disposition and a proactive personality (Gurszyńska, Katarzyna, 2013). Moreover, research demonstrates that change recipients can venture outside the limits of passivity to positively and proactively react to changes initiated by others (Bayiz Ahmad et al., 2020). In turn, non-proactive employees show little initiative, rely on others to be forces for change, and passively adapt to, or simply endure, their circumstances (Bateman, Crant, 1993). As such, they pose a considerable challenge for employers and necessitate the implementation of adequate organizational policies.

Proactive activity is further directed toward change and positive impact on both the overall situation and the individual undertaking action (Parker et al., 2006). This includes the concept of proactive communication (Curcuruto et al., 2020). During the COVID-19 pandemic, under circumstances marked by considerable uncertainty, proactive coping was associated with less COVID-19 stress for older adults relative to younger adults, as seen in the cross-over interaction (Pearman et al., 2021). When considering the benefits of proactiveness, one should also point out that individuals who expressed more proactive mindsets reported more expansive views on roles as fulfilling fundamental motives of agency and communality (Benson-Greenwald, Diekman, 2022).

As such, it is necessary to shape employee management practices in organizations so as to fully utilize the potential of the employees themselves and promote an environment conducive to employee proactiveness. Organizations desiring proactive employee behavior would be well advised to take one of three courses of action:

- select employees with proactive personality who will generally behave proactively regardless of the situation,
- develop transformational leaders who will motivate, inspire, and support proactive employee behavior,
- or cultivate a climate of innovation and flexibility, which will create a strong situation that fosters proactivity regardless of employee individual differences (McCormick et al., 2019).

Proactiveness is particularly important for young employees at the onset of their professional development as it is bound to impact their future careers (Forrier, 2023). Known factors influencing student proactiveness in professional contexts include, e.g., the type of their place of residence as well as the professional experience and education of the mother (Krause, 2012). Moreover, studies point to a strong relationship between a proactive personality and personal initiative/personality (Tornau, Frese, 2013). Conclusions reached in other studies suggest that the more proactive a person is, the more likely they are to declare the desire to start their own business in the future (Okręglicka, 2018).

However, as the natural proactiveness of individual employees is bound to vary, it is important to undertake targeted action at the organizational level. In the case of low-proactiveness employees and early-career employees, the development of specific career competencies is recommended (AlKhomeiri et al., 2021). They could help in showing current trends in the job market and required competencies. Nowadays, predictive analytics plays a crucial role in Industry 4.0 (Wolniak, Grebski, 2023b). The research of literature shows the need to expand the area of research in the field of proactive personality (Jiang et al., 2023; Sun et al., 2023).

3. Methods

The study was conducted using the statistical opinion poll method. The technique employed was a survey with the corresponding questionnaire used as the research tool. The study aiming to measure the proactive personality of young workers was conducted in Poland in 2022 and supplemented in 2023. The research questionnaire consisted of 17 questions and respondent metrics. The questions were adopted from the Proactivity Personality Scale – PPS (Bateman, Crant, 1993). Responses given to the questions were measured using the 7-point Likert scale ranging from “1 = strongly disagree” to “7 = strongly agree”, with the respondents choosing one of seven response variants, arranged symmetrically. The survey questions were accompanied by a record specifying respondent gender, age, and education.

The collected data were analyzed statistically using classical and positional descriptive analysis. Moreover, the significance of respective differences between the obtained mean values for individual gender and age groups was also considered. The Mann–Whitney U test was used to compare two groups with a non-normal distribution. All statistical tests were performed for the significance threshold of $\alpha = 0.05$. The variables constituted average values of responses regarding proactive behaviors were combined together, and an indicator- Proactive personality was built. The Cronbach’s alpha for this indicator of proactive personality was calculated (0,908). A premise was made that the reliability index ought to amount to at least 0.65 (Bourque, Clark, 1999).

The respondent selection was targeted. The aim of the study was to survey young employees with some professional experience. After the initial selection of questionnaires, 334 respondents were qualified for further analysis. Table 1 contains detailed information on the respondents participating in the survey.

Table 1.
Structure of respondents

Gender of the respondents [%]	
Female	Male
73,95%	26,05%
Age of the respondents [%]	
Less than 20 years - 8,1%	20-25 years - 91,9%
Level of education [%]	
Postgraduate	0,3 %
Higher II	2,4 %
Higher I	41,7 %
Secondary	53,9 %
Basic/Junior high	1,7 %

Source: Based on own study.

4. Results

Answering the first research question, RQ1, the above-mentioned average declarations of respondents were analysed. The results are presented in Table 2.

Table 2.
Descriptive statistics on proactive behaviors and proactivity personality in young workers

Items	Total average	Total median	Woman average	Men average
1. I am constantly on the lookout for new ways to improve my life	5,63	5,76	5,64	5,64
2. I feel driven to make a difference in my community, and maybe the world	5,43	5,60	5,43	5,43
3. I tend to let others take the initiative to start new projects*	4,84	5,07	4,77	5,03
4. Wherever I have been, I have been a powerful force for constructive change	4,51	4,58	4,39	4,84
5. I enjoy facing and overcoming obstacles to my ideas	5,36	5,49	5,27	5,62
6. Nothing is more exciting than seeing my ideas turn into reality	6,02	6,28	6,00	6,08
7. If I see something I don't like, I fix it	5,82	5,96	5,83	5,79
8. No matter what the odds, if I believe in something I will make it happen	5,29	5,47	5,27	5,33
9. I love being a champion for my ideas, even against others' opposition	5,01	5,20	4,96	5,17
10. I excel at identifying opportunities	5,01	5,11	4,88	5,36
11. I am always looking for better ways to do things	5,88	6,08	5,78	6,15
12. If I believe an idea, no obstacle will prevent me from making it happen	5,14	5,29	5,08	5,33
13. I love to challenge the status quo	4,59	4,60	4,47	4,92
14. When I have a problem, I tackle it head-on	5,47	5,60	5,42	5,63
15. I am great at turning problems into opportunities	4,81	4,90	4,72	5,01
16. I can spot a good opportunity long before others can	4,87	4,96	4,77	5,15
17. If I see someone in trouble, I help out in any way I can	5,93	6,09	5,92	5,94
Proactive personality	5,40	5,44	5,33	5,59

Note. Scale: "7" means "I completely agree" and "1" means "I completely disagree."

Source: Based on own study.

As follows from Table 2, the respondents declared the most often that they are excited seeing their ideas are turn into reality. However, the lowest acceptance score was recorded for having a powerful force for constructive change. The average of proactive personality manifested by young employees with certain professional experience is 5,4.

Answering the second and third research questions, RQ2 and RQ3, the presence of statistically significant differences was assessed using the non-parametric U Mann-Whitney test (Table 3). In a further step of the analysis of the results, it was demonstrated that between 17 proactive behaviors and proactivity personality in young workers and, gender, and age.

Table 3.

U Mann-Whitney result test for proactive behaviors and proactivity personality in young workers

Items	Gender		Age	
	Test M-W: Z	p	Test M-W: Z	p
1. I am constantly on the lookout for new ways to improve my life	0,457	0,647	1,094	0,274
2. I feel driven to make a difference in my community, and maybe the world	0,12	0,990	1,874	0,061
3. I tend to let others take the initiative to start new projects*	1,355	0,175	-0,188	0,851
4. Wherever I have been, I have been a powerful force for constructive change	2,700	0,007	0,630	0,528
5. I enjoy facing and overcoming obstacles to my ideas	2,076	0,038	-0,497	0,619
6. Nothing is more exciting than seeing my ideas turn into reality	0,805	0,421	-0,191	0,848
7. If I see something I don't like, I fix it	-1,002	0,316	0,174	0,862
8. No matter what the odds, if I believe in something I will make it happen	0,688	0,492	1,442	0,149
9. I love being a champion for my ideas, even against others' opposition	1,119	0,263	2,182	0,029
10. I excel at identifying opportunities	2,804	0,005	0,013	0,99
11. I am always looking for better ways to do things	2,188	0,029	1,756	0,079
12. If I believe an idea, no obstacle will prevent me from making it happen	1,601	0,109	0,036	0,971
13. I love to challenge the status quo	2,429	0,015	1,469	0,142
14. When I have a problem, I tackle it head-on	1,259	0,208	-0,234	0,815
15. I am great at turning problems into opportunities	1,671	0,095	0,314	0,754
16. I can spot a good opportunity long before others can	1,940	0,052	0,860	0,39
17. If I see someone in trouble, I help out in any way I can	0,041	0,967	-0,140	0,889
Proactive personality	2,054	0,04	1,009	0,313

Source: Based on own study.

The following proactive behaviors examined differed according to gender (Table 3):

- Wherever I have been, I have been a powerful force for constructive change.
- I enjoy facing and overcoming obstacles to my ideas.
- I excel at identifying opportunities.
- I am always looking for better ways to do things.
- I love to challenge the status quo.

However, only one proactive behavior – “I love being a champion for my ideas, even against others' opposition” examined differed according to age (Table 3).

In the case of the statement that proactive personality in young workers is significantly different for gender groups, the male employees showed higher overall levels of proactiveness (5,59) than their female counterparts (5,33). The gender analysis showed significant differences between the opinions of women and men ($p = 0.04$). In this way, the Hypothesis 2.1 was confirmed.

Moreover, the statement that proactive personality in young workers is significantly different for age groups was examined. The age analysis showed no significant differences between the opinions of respondents under 20 years and respondents in 20-25 age ($p = 0.313$). Thus, the Hypothesis 2.1 were rejected.

5. Summary and discussion

Many contemporary professions require a conscious effort to constantly search for new opportunities in the environment, gain new knowledge and experience, and demonstrate individual workplace initiative. A proactive personality of an employee goes a long way to facilitating such abilities. It is essential to analyze the personality traits of young employees as it will largely determine their long-term professional engagement and potential. As follows from the conducted study, the early-career employees surveyed showed a high overall proactive personality, although the average results were lower in the case of female respondents. Given the above, organizations are recommended to take steps towards enhancing proactive attitudes in employees, particularly women.

The study allowed us to identify challenges faced by employers and formulate specific recommendations in terms of HR management, with due consideration for the proactive personality of employees. Current challenges for entrepreneurs include taking into account proactive personality in HRM practices, in particular when selecting and hiring employees. Moreover, the challenge is to support superiors in the development and creation of opportunities to use employees' proactiveness, as well as to create a proactive organizational culture. Specifically, the following managerial implications were identified.

1. Design HRM policies that will facilitate a goal-oriented employee focus.
2. Make efforts to ensure more seamless onboarding of female employees at the beginning of their professional careers. To this end, targeted HRM practices aimed at supporting women and enhancing their individual potential should be implemented. Institutions such as e.g. career offices already during university studies, NGOs, business organizations, and entrepreneur associations can all contribute to such efforts.

3. Plan the career paths of young employees taking their proactive personality into account. This will be helpful both in terms of more effective task assignment and proactiveness support.
4. Create conditions conducive to the development and utilization of employee proactiveness, which may help to limit employee turnover.
5. Create a proactive work environment with proactive communication practices that aim to emphasize opportunities rather than problems.
6. Employ HRM practices in the area of employee development to encourage and support desirable changes in employee behavior. Implementing teamwork methods rooted in creative problem solving, including design thinking, may help staff members to question the status quo. In turn, training programs, as well as individual and team coaching, can all contribute to improving employee abilities in terms of change management and constructive implementation. In this context, individual mentoring can be particularly recommendable in raising the employees' self-esteem and belief in their own abilities.

Proactiveness refers to a specific, desirable type of employee behavior, which is why, although it can pose a challenge for employers, it is worth enhancing and supporting through various targeted efforts.

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