

6-1-2010

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This is the accepted version of the following article: Bolino, M., Valcea, S., & Harvey, J. (2010).

Employee, manage thyself: The potentially negative implications of expecting employees to behave proactively. *Journal of Occupational and Organizational Psychology*, 83(2), 325-345. doi: 10.1348/096317910X493134, which has been published in final form at <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1348/096317910X493134/abstract>

Original Published Citation

Bolino, M., Valcea, S., & Harvey, J. (2010). Employee, manage thyself: The potentially negative implications of expecting employees to behave proactively. *Journal of Occupational and Organizational Psychology*, 83(2), 325-345. doi: 10.1348/096317910X493134

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Employee, manage thyself: The potentially negative implications of expecting employees to behave proactively

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Previous research investigating proactive behaviour at work has generally focused on the ways in which proactive behaviour enables individuals and organizations to be more effective. Although it has been noted that some proactive behaviours may be undesirable or have potentially negative consequences, researchers have not examined the 'dark side' of proactive behaviour in any systematic way. In this conceptual paper, we explore the potentially negative individual and organizational implications of expecting employees to behave proactively. Specifically, at the individual level, we argue that expecting proactive behaviour in organizations may contribute to stress among employees and friction between proactive and less proactive employees. At the organizational level, we suggest that relying on proactive behaviour may cause harm to an organization by undermining its ability to socialize employees and foster its organizational culture, weakening its learning capability, and reducing its ability to develop future leaders. We conclude by discussing additional avenues for studies examining the potential costs of proactive behaviour for both individuals and organizations alike.

Organizations seeking to gain an advantage over their competitors are increasingly turning to their employees as a way to differentiate themselves (Wright, Dunford, & Snell, 2001). In particular, many organizations view proactive behaviours on the part of employees as essential for remaining competitive and relevant in a dynamic environment (cf. Ashford, Blatt, & Vande Walle, 2003; Crant, 2000; Frese & Fay, 2001; Grant & Ashford, 2008). Employees who engage in proactive behaviours are considered 'go getters' because they look for ways to take anticipatory actions that will positively impact themselves, their environment, or both (Grant & Ashford, 2008). Indeed, they take 'initiative in improving current circumstances or creating new ones' which 'involves challenging the *status quo* rather than passively adapting to present conditions' (Crant, 2000, p. 436). However, in this paper, we will explore the possibility

that proactive behaviours may be associated with negative consequences for both employees and organizations.

Much of the research in this area has found that proactive behaviours, such as seeking feedback (Ashford *et al.*, 2003), demonstrating initiative (Frese & Fay, 2001), building networks (Ashford & Black, 1996), seeking information (Morrison, 1993a), helping others (Organ, 1988), taking charge (Morrison & Phelps, 1999), expressing voice (LePine & Van Dyne, 1998; Van Dyne & LePine, 1998), and redefining work (Ashford & Black, 1996; Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001), are associated with a number of positive outcomes. However, some recent research (Bergeron, 2007; Grant, 2008; Halbesleben, Harvey, & Bolino, 2009; Van Dyne & Ellis, 2004) suggests that these type of behaviours may also have unforeseen negative consequences for employees. Building upon this work, we consider some of the potentially overlooked and likely unintentional negative consequences of proactive behaviours for employees and organizations.

In a number of recent efforts, researchers have sought to review and integrate earlier work on proactive behaviour (Crant, 2000; Frese & Fay, 2001; Grant & Ashford, 2008; Parker & Collins, 2010). This work supports the view that proactive behaviour is generally conceptualized and viewed as something that is desirable. Research indicates that individuals with a proactive disposition tend to have higher job performance (Crant, 1995) and greater career success (Seibert, Crant, & Kraimer, 1999). Moreover, a proactive personality has been linked with organizational innovation (Parker, 1998) and entrepreneurial success (Becherer & Maurer, 1999). Other studies indicate that newcomers who seek out information and build social networks are more likely to become successfully integrated into their new organizations and to better understand and enjoy their jobs (Ashford & Black, 1996; Morrison, 1993a; Reichers, 1987). Finally, studies indicate that proactive feedback seeking is positively related to employee effectiveness (Ashford & Tsui, 1991). Taken together, this research suggests that employees who behave proactively are more likely to be effective and successful at work. Furthermore, this line of work has also emphasized that proactive behaviours make an important contribution to the effective functioning of organizations, particularly in an era of empowerment, decentralization, and continuous change (Crant, 2000; Grant & Ashford, 2008; Griffin, Neal, & Parker, 2007).

However, a few researchers have acknowledged that it is possible that these behaviours have negative consequences. In particular, it has been noted that some forms of proactive behaviour could be undesirable, that too much proactive behaviour may be problematic, and that proactive behaviour may be harmful if it is misguided (Bateman & Crant, 1999; Crant, 2000). Consistent with this idea, Chan (2006) found that proactive employees tend to perform poorly when they misjudge work situations. Other work has noted that those who engage in proactive behaviours might incur personal costs. For instance, studies indicate that poor performers who seek feedback tend to harm their image (Ashford *et al.*, 2003). Moreover, the findings of other studies suggest that employees who are especially proactive in their work may also experience higher levels of job stress, role overload, and work–family conflict (Bolino & Turnley, 2005; Grant, 2008).

Nevertheless, these issues have seldom been the focus of research about proactive behaviour. The purpose of this conceptual paper, therefore, is to explore the potentially negative implications of proactive behaviour. Specifically, implicit in most prior examinations of proactive behaviour is the notion that organizations should seek to hire employees who are going to behave proactively and that organizations characterized

by high levels of proactive behaviour among their employees are likely to be more successful (Crant, 2000). In contrast, we argue that when organizations expect proactive behaviour, such expectations could also lead to undesirable consequences for employees and the organizations that employ them.

Our paper, then, has three goals. First, we highlight the potentially negative implications of expecting employees to be proactive by describing the ways in which proactive behaviours may contribute to employee stress and inter-employee tension. Second, we examine how relying on proactive behaviour may harm an organization, by weakening its ability to foster its organizational culture through socialization, reducing its learning capability, and diminishing its ability to develop leaders. Third and finally, we outline avenues for future research that might examine positive, negative, and context-dependent aspects of proactive behaviour in organizations.

The view of proactive behaviour adopted in this work

Proactive behaviour has been described, discussed, and defined in a number of different ways (Grant & Ashford, 2008). Before introducing our overall theoretical framework, then, it would be useful to clarify the view of proactive behaviour taken in this paper. Whereas other researchers have offered more comprehensive treatments of proactive behaviour, we briefly address the three aspects of proactive behaviour that are most relevant to the central ideas in this paper. First, we address the distinction between proactive behaviour and proactive personality. Second, we differentiate proactive behaviour from organizational citizenship behaviour (OCB) - discretionary behaviour that facilitates organizational functioning. Third, we discuss how our view of proactive behaviour - as management researchers - may differ from the ways in which other parties (e.g., employees, clients, society, practitioners) may conceptualize proactive behaviour.

Throughout this paper, we define proactive behaviour as both general actions and context-specific behaviours that are focused on outcomes such as improved job performance, career success, feelings of personal control, and role clarity (Crant, 2000) and that are agentic and anticipatory in nature (Grant & Ashford, 2008). These behaviours are often context specific and prompted by situations that create the opportunity for these proactive behaviours to occur. This differs from proactive personality, which is 'the relatively stable tendency to effect environmental change' (Bateman & Crant, 1993, p. 103). Proactive personality, or a general tendency towards proactivity, is a personality characteristic that not all employees possess. However, any employee can engage in proactive behaviours if the situation allows for it.

Many different types of OCBs may qualify as proactive behaviours; however, as noted by Parker (1998), OCBs can also be passive or reactive behaviours. As such, not all OCBs would be considered proactive behaviour. Thus, whether or not an OCB qualifies as proactive behaviour depends on the type of OCB and if it is reactive or proactive. For example, interpersonal helping (Organ, 1988) that is proactively offered could be characterized as proactive behaviour; however, if someone requests assistance, and the employee provides it, this would not be considered an instance of proactive behaviour. Similarly, employee voice - constructive communication intended to positively change the organization (LePine & Van Dyne, 2001) - may occur in a proactive sense, as when employees point out ways to improve the organization; alternatively, it may be prompted by a supervisor question that the employee seeks to answer. Thus, OCBs can be proactive, but there are also many times when they are reactive.

As described earlier, there are predominantly positive connotations associated with proactive behaviours. However, some managers or observers may describe employees who engage in proactive behaviours as overzealous, impulsive, cavalier, or even volatile. In these cases, then, it is unlikely that the label 'proactive behaviour' would even be used to describe such actions. Indeed, proactive behaviour might instead be labelled as ingratiation, insubordination, trouble making, or given other derogatory labels. It is important, therefore, to keep in mind that researchers, organizations, employees, co-workers, clients, and society may all conceptualize proactive behaviour differently. As organizational researchers, though, we adopt a neutral view of proactive behaviour in the workplace and simply focus on the behaviour itself. Indeed, one of our principal goals is to suggest that the reluctance to associate proactive behaviour with negative implications could hinder scholarly progress and organizational development.

All about resources: Resource-based view, conservation of resources, and resource dependence theory

In prior work on proactive behaviour (e.g., Frese & Fay, 2001; Van Dyne, Cummings, & Parks, 1995), researchers have developed frameworks outlining the antecedents and consequences of proactive behaviour. Each of these different frameworks specifies that proactive behaviour has both individual and organizational consequences. Consistent with this general approach, we focus on outcomes at the individual and organizational levels. In addition, we rely upon a resource framework to develop propositions about the effects of proactive behaviour. This approach is useful because employees use resources to meet job demands, work to accumulate resources, and deploy resources when faced with stressful situations (Hobfoll, 1989). Likewise, organizations rely on resources in order to develop products, generate profits, and create a sustained competitive advantage (Barney, 1991; Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978).

Resources are anything that an individual or an organization values, which can be used in both instrumental and symbolic ways (Hobfoll, 1989). Thus, resources can be actual tangible items, personal characteristics, or behaviours (Hobfoll, 1989). Organizations could provide resources such as financial or social support (or other similar things), or employees can use their own personal traits, such as flexibility or sense of control, as resources (Hobfoll & Shirom, 2000). For these reasons, we consider proactive behaviours a resource, for both employees and organizations. The resource of proactive behaviour facilitates employee effectiveness and increases organizational performance. For employees, proactive behaviours are resources that can help them to improve their job performance, or to anticipate and deal with potentially stressful situations (e.g., Ashford & Black, 1996; Frese & Fay, 2001). It is important to note that employees also need certain resources, such as particular dispositions or traits, time, and support, in order to engage in proactive behaviours. Proactive behaviours are resources for organizations because they can increase the effective functioning of organizations by improving productivity (Koys, 2001; Podsakoff & MacKenzie, 1997) and innovation (Frese & Fay, 2001). Given the importance of resources for both individuals and organizations, and that proactive behaviours themselves may be conceptualized as a critical resource, a resource framework should be useful for understanding the effects of proactive behaviours. For this reason, we use a resource perspective in order to integrate and organize our arguments into a more coherent whole.

Conservation of resources

Conservation of resource (COR) theory emphasizes the role that resources play in the context of stress (Hobfoll, 1988, 1998). Specifically, COR theory proposes that employees are motivated by the desire to obtain and protect resources. Resources can be anything that is personally valued, and this might include objects, conditions, personal characteristics, or behaviours. Individuals are concerned with resources not only because they have instrumental value, but also because they have a symbolic value that people often use to define themselves (Hobfoll, 1989). When resources are lost, depleted, or threatened, individuals experience stress. Additionally, COR theory states that employees who are confronted with stress seek to minimize the loss of their resources and to conserve them. At the same time, though, COR theory also specifies that people draw upon resources to cope with stressful situations. Thus, COR theory seems helpful for understanding the potentially negative implications of proactive behaviour for employees.

Resource-based view

The resource-based view (RBV) of the firm conceptualizes organizations as bundles of resources or capabilities that are used to develop a sustainable competitive advantage over other firms (Barney, 1991). The resources used to create a sustainable competitive advantage are valuable, rare, inimitable, and non-substitutable (Barney, 1991, 1986). Resources have been conceptualized as management skills, organizational processes, information, and so on (Barney, Wright, & Ketchen, 2001). Importantly, the RBV has been extended to include the area of strategic human resource management (Wright *et al.*, 2001). This work suggests that an organization's human capital is one of its most critical resources. Specifically, organizations draw upon the skills and behaviours of their employees and leverage this resource to create a competitive advantage (Wright, McMahan, & McWilliams, 1994). We will use RBV theory as a lens, then, to understand the potentially negative effects of proactive behaviour at the organizational level.

Resource dependence theory

Finally, resource dependence theory (RDT) focuses on how organizations depend on resources and how dependence shapes the actions of the organization and the various parties within it (e.g., employees, teams; Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978). Organizations need resources to generate returns and create a competitive advantage; thus, the ability of a firm to manage its resources effectively is at the core of RDT. The two key elements of this theory are an organization's power and its dependence. These two elements are inversely correlated, such that the more power an organization has, the less dependent it will be on others; likewise, the less dependent an organization is on others, the more power it has (Casciaro & Piskorski, 2005). Given these relationships, RDT suggests that organizations that are highly dependent on a certain type of resource will not have much power over the supplier of that resource. As described later, we believe that organizations that rely too heavily on the proactive behaviour of their employees may risk eroding their own power and potentially undermine important organizational resources.

Expecting proactive behaviours: Implications for employees

A key element in Grant and Ashford's (2008) explanation of proactive behaviour is the agentic and anticipatory nature of such behaviour. That is, rather than passively reacting, employees mindfully plan, calculate, and act in advance of future events (Grant & Ashford, 2008). Conceptualizing proactive behaviours in this way suggests that they are discretionary and that employees may or may not engage in them, depending on situational and dispositional factors (Grant & Ashford, 2008). Nevertheless, a casual look at job descriptions finds that the word 'proactive' is mentioned more and more often (Campbell, 2000), and Erdogan and Bauer (2005, p. 859) note that, 'Organizations increasingly expect employees to demonstrate proactive behaviours'. In short, in many organizations there is an expectation that employees will not only perform their jobs competently, but also that they will engage in proactive behaviours.

However, the expectation for employees to act more proactively could have negative consequences for employees. Campbell (2000) referred to one potentially negative consequence as the 'initiative paradox'. According to the initiative paradox, organizations tend to encourage employees to behave proactively, but frequently punish proactive behaviour that they consider misguided (even though, as noted earlier, they might use a different label to describe such behaviour). Thus, while employees may reap benefits for proactive behaviours that are viewed favourably (Grant, Parker, & Collins, 2009), they may pay a price for proactive behaviour that is labelled 'misguided' by their superiors. Consistent with this notion, Erdogan and Bauer (2005) found that employees with a proactive personality - who are more likely to engage in proactive behaviours - only achieved greater career success when their values were aligned with the values of their organizations and when employees' job skills met the demands of their jobs. Moreover, COR theory suggests other potentially negative effects of proactivity that largely remain unexplored. In 'Proactive behaviours as a source of employee stress' section, then, we discuss why, from a resource perspective, requiring proactive behaviour may have negative implications for employees.

Proactive behaviours as a source of employee stress

As discussed earlier, COR theory is based on the idea that people seek to obtain and protect resources; moreover, as resources are expended or threatened, individuals tend to experience stress (Hobfoll, 1989). Given the agentic and self-directed nature of proactive behaviour, acting proactively is likely to consume resources. In some instances, being proactive may consume relatively few resources, particularly when such behaviours occur within the context of an employee's everyday job responsibilities; however, as researchers have noted (e.g., Crant, 2000; Grant & Ashford, 2008), proactive acts often involve going beyond what is technically required of employees. For instance, Grant and Ashford (2008) argued that proactive behaviour, whether it is in-role or extra-role, entails anticipation, planning, and action directed towards future impact. As such, behaving proactively is likely to deplete resources, such as time or mental energy. Likewise, if being proactive requires working extra hours or taking on additional responsibilities (e.g., Bolino & Turnley, 2005), such acts could also consume physical energy. Thus, to the extent that proactive behaviours deplete resources, engaging in such actions should contribute to stress.

Implication 1: The greater the amount of resources (e.g., time and physical/mental energy) employees expend when they behave proactively, the greater the amount of stress they are likely to experience.

Consistent with COR theory, previous research on proactive behaviours has suggested that not all employees have the same resources to be proactive (e.g., Crant, 2000; Grant & Ashford, 2008). This lack of resources can leave employees vulnerable to additional losses and stress (Hobfoll, 1989). Furthermore, because organizations often encourage employees to be proactive and tend to reward such behaviour (Seibert, Kraimer, & Crant, 2001; Seibert *et al.*, 1999), employees who lack the resources to behave proactively are likely to expect a future loss of resources (i.e., financial resources or prestige) in comparison to their more proactive peers. Thus, the emphasis on proactive behaviours in today's organizations (Campbell, 2000) is likely to be particularly stressful for non-proactive employees, because they have fewer resources to deal with this demand and because of expected future losses of resources associated with the current lack of resources.

While lacking any skill or trait expected by the organization is likely to put an employee in a difficult position, lacking resources to be proactive may have more salient negative effects. Moreover, Hobfoll (1989) suggests that individuals who have fewer resources (e.g., traits that make engaging in proactive behaviour less burdensome, or supportive leadership that enables individuals to engage in proactive behaviours) often try to mitigate their losses through costly strategies that have little chance of success and only provide short-term payoffs. For example, employees who do not have a dispositional concern for others, but feel that helping may be instrumental for obtaining desired outcomes, may still engage in helping behaviour for short periods of time, for impression-management reasons (Bolino, 1999; Hui, Lam, & Law, 2000). However, this investment of time and effort is likely to be unfruitful in the long run if supervisors view such behaviours as manipulative, self-serving, or unethical (Allen & Rush, 1998; Johnson, Erez, Kiker, & Motowidlo, 2002). Similarly, because proactive behaviours are anticipatory in nature, rather than reactive (Grant & Ashford, 2008), attempts to make up for a lack of proactive behaviours through alternatives are unlikely to be successful. As a result, employees who lack the future-oriented, anticipatory thinking that defines proactive behaviours, or who do not have the autonomy, supportive leadership or other contextual factors to support in such behaviours, are more likely to engage in extra-role behaviours that will be viewed as 'misguided', or seen as doing more harm than good. Such behaviour, unfortunately, is also likely to have negative consequences beyond not achieving an expected or desired outcome, since organizations are likely to punish proactive behaviour that is seen as unethical, self-serving, or harmful (Crant, 2000; Grant & Ashforth, 2008).

Implication 2a: Stress associated with proactive behaviour is likely to be especially great among employees who lack the resources to be proactive.

Implication 2b: The proactive behaviour of employees who lack the resources needed to be proactive is more likely to be perceived as unethical, self-serving, or causing harm.

Proactive behaviours as a source of inter-employee tension

Another negative effect that may occur in organizations that expect their employees to be proactive is increased tension between proactive and non-proactive employees. This tension is rooted in the fact that proactive behaviours help some employees acquire more resources, while at the same time threatening other employees' current or future resources (Hobfoll, 1989). Previous research indicates that different approaches to

conserving resources may put employees in conflict. For example, early research uncovered a phenomenon referred to as 'systematic soldiering' (Wren, 2005). Different from natural soldiering, which described a general tendency of workers to 'take it easy', systematic soldiering stemmed mainly from the relations that workers had with other workers (Wren, 2005). Systematic soldiering consisted of regulating the output of each individual in a group, according to norms that dictated how much output was acceptable. Hence, low performers were disciplined and motivated to increase their performance so that the group as a whole would not suffer penalties, while high performers were pressured to decrease their performance so that the group would not be held to increased future expectations of performance by management. In other words, the group was punishing both performance that went above the group norm - in order to conserve its resources in terms of the work effort that was expected - and performance that fell short of group norms - in order to conserve its resources in terms of expected rewards associated with the work. Thus, the group was actively trying to preserve an ideal situation in which both the invested resources and the expected pay-off resources were at an acceptable level to everyone.

More recently, in the OCB literature, some researchers have alluded to the idea that employees may compete to be seen as loyal employees, and that such competition could have harmful implications for inter-employee cooperation (Bolino, Turnley, & Niehoff, 2004; Van Dyne & Ellis, 2004). In particular, Van Dyne and Ellis (2004) note that employees who are seen by their peers as doing too much could be the victims of retaliation ranging from mild criticism or attempts to harm the employee's reputation within the group to more severe responses, such as acts of sabotage to the employee's work or attempts to remove him or her from the group. On the one hand, employees who perform fewer OCBs may pressure others to decrease their OCBs as well, in an attempt to conserve their own resources in terms of expected effort. On the other hand, employees who do more OCBs may pressure others to also do more, in an attempt to conserve their own resources in terms of needed effort. We expect a similar phenomenon to occur in the case of proactive behaviour, which is likely to contribute to inter-employee tension.

It is also possible that, due to a combination of a self-serving bias and an actor-observer effect (Fiske & Taylor, 1991), employees who are not engaging in proactive behaviours, and are thus unable to attain desired resources in the form of organizational rewards, may perceive proactive behaviours that do not affect them directly and positively as being image-enhancing, self-serving behaviours. Simultaneously, they may view their own performance of proactive behaviours as a result of fewer opportunities to engage in such behaviours. The actor-observer effect results in dispositional attributions for the actions of others and in situational or unstable attributions for one's own behaviour. The self-serving bias is a tendency to deny responsibility for failure, but take credit for success. In the case of proactive behaviour, then, employees who are rarely proactive may attribute others' proactive behaviour to their dispositional tendency to promote themselves and manage impressions, while denying responsibility for their own lack of proactive behaviours and blaming their job situation. As a consequence, it is likely that less-proactive employees will have negative views of and less-positive relationships with their more proactive peers.

A similar effect may occur when employees want to engage in proactive behaviours, but work on jobs or in contexts that do not allow it. Grant and Ashford (2008) proposed three situational antecedents to proactive behaviours: accountability, ambiguity, and autonomy. Although some employees may have a natural tendency to engage in

proactive behaviours, they may lack the opportunity to engage in such behaviour because their jobs are highly specified and regulated. Ideally, an organization that values proactive behaviours would design jobs so as to allow for these types of behaviours to occur. Nevertheless, even in these organizations, some jobs will provide more opportunity for proactive behaviours than other jobs will. Failure to recognize these differences when rewarding proactive behaviours may lead some employees to perceive that organizational rewards are not being fairly allocated (Colquitt, Greenberg, & Zapata-Phelan, 2005). In other words, if proactive behaviour is rewarded, but employees perceive unequal opportunities to engage in them, a sense of injustice will set in among employees working in more restrictive jobs. That is, they will feel like they are perceived to be less hardworking and valuable compared to others working in less restrictive jobs. As a result, these employees are likely to resent co-workers whose jobs enable them to be proactive and reap benefits from it.

Implication 3: Organizational expectations about engagement in proactive behaviours may lead to increased tension between proactive and non-proactive employees.

Expecting proactive behaviours: Implications for organizations

Despite a tendency to focus on the positive effects of proactive behaviours (Crant, 2000), some more recent work has given greater treatment to the potentially negative aspects of proactive behaviours (e.g., Grant & Ashford, 2008). At the same time, this line of work has generally focused on the personal costs of being proactive, such as potential harm to one's image (Ashford *et al.*, 2003) or increased feelings of stress and exhaustion (Bolino & Turnley, 2005; Grant, 2008). However, as early as 1993, Bateman and Crant noted the possibility that proactive behaviours may not always result in positive organizational outcomes. Following up on this idea many years later, Chan (2006) demonstrated that the degree to which individuals are able to make effective judgments and respond to situations determines whether or not their proactive behaviours will contribute positively to organizational effectiveness.

Although we agree that, overall, proactive behaviours in organizations should generally do more good than harm, it is also possible that proactive behaviours might actually undermine organizational competitiveness and performance. However, because they are beneficial in many ways, organizations and managers may consider proactive behaviours as a solution for many organizational problems. For example, prior research suggests that in the pursuit of greater efficiency, organizations may seek to find substitutes for leadership (e.g., Kerr & Jermier, 1978) or rely on self-managed teams. Implicit in these actions is the idea that organizations expect that employees will engage in the proactive behaviours necessary to fill in the voids created when active leadership and supervisor-managed teams are withdrawn. Indeed, given how positively proactive behaviours have been depicted in both the practitioner and academic literatures, organizations might be led, either consciously or unconsciously, to give less attention to certain resources under the assumption that proactive behaviour on the part of employees will enable them to sustain their competitive advantage.

Relatively, few empirical studies, though, have actually investigated the link between proactive behaviour and organizational effectiveness. The studies that have documented a link between proactive behaviours and organizational effectiveness have mainly been concerned with OCBs (Podsakoff, Mackenzie, Paine, & Bachrach, 2000), which, as

noted earlier, may sometimes be more reactive than proactive. In a recent study, Griffin *et al.* (2007) developed a model of work-role performance that describes proactive behaviours that should contribute to individual, team, and organizational effectiveness. However, while their model is carefully constructed and emphasizes behaviours that enable organizations to manage interdependence and uncertainty – two capabilities that are important for organizational effectiveness – they left empirical tests of the relationship between proactive behaviours and organizational effectiveness as something to be investigated in future research. Moreover, even if proactive behaviours enhance organizational performance in the short term, it is unclear if proactive behaviour is a source of sustainable competitive advantage.

Drawing on our notion of proactive behaviours as a resource, we rely on arguments from RBV theory (Barney, 1991) and RDT (Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978) to suggest that when organizations rely too heavily on proactive behaviours by employees, they can become dependent on these employees. In turn, this could reduce the value of other organizational resources, such as organizational culture (due to diminished socialization efforts), learning capacity (because of reduced investments in training and development), and leadership-development capabilities (as a result of an increased reliance on self-management). We focus on these particular resources because they have all been identified by previous research as sources of competitive advantage (e.g., Barney, 1991; Day, 2000; Hatch & Dyer, 2004) and, at the same time, have been shown to be positively influenced by employees' proactive behaviours (Ashforth, Sluss, & Saks, 2007; Cummings, 1978; Edmondson, 1999). Our overall argument, as we explain below, is that organizational effectiveness may at times suffer when organizations substitute proactive behaviours by employees for actual organizational resources and capabilities.

Undermining the resources needed to socialize employees into the organization's culture

Organizational culture is a resource with the potential for creating a sustained competitive advantage when it is rare and difficult to imitate (Barney, 1986), and the effective socialization of new employees plays a critical role in leveraging this resource. Indeed, socialization is the primary means through which culture is transferred to employees (Cable & Parsons, 2001). The socialization of new employees can occur through the organization's use of specific socialization tactics, or as a result of these employees' proactive efforts (Ashforth *et al.*, 2007). Cable and Parsons (2001) showed that when new employees are socialized to the organization using institutionalized tactics, they are more likely to accept the core beliefs of the organization and its culture, in addition to experiencing greater levels of organizational fit. However, institutionalized socialization tactics can also be supplemented by high levels of proactive behaviour by employees. For instance, employees may proactively build their own social networks within the firm or seek feedback about the organization's values (Kim, Cable, & Kim, 2005).

It is certainly possible that both methods of socialization could result in equally beneficial results for the organization. In fact, Kim *et al.* (2005) found that proactive socialization by employees led to similar levels of perceived organizational fit as did more institutionalized practices of socialization. For this reason, then, one might argue that proactive behaviours can substitute for more costly, institutionalized socialization tactics. It is unclear, however, what effects proactive socialization efforts might have in the absence of organizationally directed socialization efforts. Ashforth *et al.* (2007), for example, suggest that institutionalized socialization tactics provide opportunities for

proactive socialization efforts to occur. Thus, if organizations cut back on the use of institutionalized tactics, and seek to rely on the proactive behaviour of employees instead, they may actually reduce the opportunities of new employees to find mentors, learn from fellow workers, and acquire knowledge through their own observations (Ashforth *et al.*, 2007). In other words, proactive socialization does not replace institutionalized socialization, but rather to some extent it is dependent on it. For this reason, reducing organizational socialization efforts may actually undermine the benefits of proactive socialization. As a result, employees' effective assimilation into the organizational culture may be delayed or be less successful.

Moreover, from a resource-dependence point of view, reducing investments in institutionalized socialization tactics, in favour of relying on proactive employee socialization, may result in an over-dependence on proactive behaviour. This course of action effectively limits the organization's future alternatives for socializing employees. In addition, increased dependence often leads to less favourable exchange conditions (e.g., a need to pay higher salaries to retain highly proactive employees). Thus, any benefits that may have accrued from an increased reliance on proactive behaviours could actually be reallocated to these same employees (i.e., in the form of higher salaries) in order to retain them (Coff, 1999). Furthermore, an over-reliance on employees to behave proactively during socialization may also result in organizations weakening the resource base they need in order to effectively socialize future employees; in other words, the systems and resources used to socialize employees may be neglected and become obsolete. Finally, consistent with RDT, increased dependence on proactive employees can create greater uncertainty for the organization. In particular, proactive newcomers may not always be available, they may not be available at the right time, or they may leave unexpectedly. In such cases, then, the organization's capacity to transfer its culture to new employees would be greatly diminished. Therefore, we propose:

Implication 4: Organizations that rely on employees to transfer their culture through proactive socialization efforts, as a substitute for institutionalized socialization, may reduce their ability to transfer the organizational culture.

Undermining the organization's capacity to learn

Prior research suggests that proactive employees actively look for opportunities to learn and develop (Edmondson, 1999; Sonnentag, 2003). Proactive learners are more motivated to learn (Major, Turner, & Fletcher, 2006), are able to more precisely channel learning efforts towards needed areas, and can more comfortably pace themselves (Ashforth *et al.*, 2007). Clearly, organizations benefit in many ways when employees take it upon themselves to learn and develop. Indeed, at the team level, studies have shown that the learning efforts of moderately proactive management teams positively influence business unit performance (Bunderson & Sutcliffe, 2003). However, it is possible that individual proactive learning efforts might not always strengthen an organization's learning capability (e.g., DiBella, Nevis, & Gould, 1996). Organizational learning capability is 'the capacity (or processes) within an organization to maintain or improve performance based on experience' (DiBella *et al.*, 1996, p. 363); it involves knowledge acquisition, sharing, and utilization. The degree to which proactive employees disseminate what they have learned through their own efforts, though, is not well researched.

Consistent with RDT, Coff (1999) argues that access to information is an important source of bargaining power. However, given that sharing valuable knowledge with the rest of the organization would reduce an employee's power relative to the organization, many employees may share only as much information as they must in order to achieve their personal goals. Moreover, since their knowledge was acquired through their own efforts, rather than as a result of formal training, they may be more likely to consider it proprietary information. Consequently, it is less likely that knowledge acquired through the proactive learning efforts of employees will be disseminated as widely among other organization members. Accordingly, knowledge acquired through proactive behaviour may not facilitate organizational learning to the same degree that knowledge acquired through formalized training and development programmes might.

Furthermore, when organizations expect proactive behaviour to substitute for formal training and learning opportunities, it may lead them to become increasingly dependent on employees who behave proactively. In light of the increased mobility of today's workforce (Cascio, 1995), though, this could have especially negative long-run implications. That is, organizations may have difficulty-replacing employees with critical knowledge who depart. In addition, given the changing nature of the employment relationship - from one characterized by an exchange of loyalty for job security, to a more transactional one (Cascio, 1995) - it is possible that proactive employees may only be willing to develop certain types of knowledge. RBV theory argues that firms benefit more from firm-specific, rather than general knowledge. Hatch and Dyer (2004), for example, found that firms perform better when they invest in training programmes that emphasize building firm-specific knowledge. RDT, however, predicts that individuals prefer to have multiple alternatives rather than being dependent on one party. Thus, proactive employees should be less likely to develop knowledge that is highly specific to their employment relationship. Accordingly, relying on proactive learning at the expense of formal learning opportunities could also result in less firm-specific knowledge. Finally, if organizations decrease their investments in formal training and development efforts, they may also diminish their capacity to offer quality training and development programmes down the road.

Implication 5: Organizations that rely on employees to engage in proactive behaviours for learning and development purposes, as a substitute for formal training and development efforts, may weaken the organization's capability to acquire, share, and retain organization-specific knowledge.

Undermining leadership and the development of future leaders

Leadership is another resource that has the potential to create a competitive advantage for organizations. Because leadership capability is valuable, rare, inimitable, and non-substitutable (Barney, 1991), it is an essential resource for firms that seek to thrive. However, when organizations expect employees to be proactive and manage themselves, the organization may ultimately undermine the development of future organizational leaders. Indeed, while proactive employees might step into leadership roles and continue to produce the desired results, Simons (1995) warns that relying on employees to manage themselves in this way may also come with hidden dangers. In particular, if organizations rely too heavily on proactive behaviours as a substitute for leadership, they are likely to reduce their control over leadership issues in the long term.

Consistent with RDT, organizations may lose their ability to exercise control if they become too dependent on employees to lead themselves. Additionally, if there is turnover among employees who have been managing themselves, the organization will be forced to recruit employees who will behave proactively in this way, too, or see if they can somehow develop leaders in an environment where employees have been expected to lead themselves.

Finally, if organizations expect employees to be proactive in ways that lessen the need for them to be led or managed, they may lose the opportunity and the very capacity to effectively develop leaders. In other words, when a supervisor is assigned the responsibility of providing direction and support to employees, the organization is providing an opportunity for this supervisor to develop and hone his or her leadership skills. If supervision and direction are replaced by proactive behaviours, the organization may become leaner and more efficient, but it may also decrease its capacity to develop strong leaders.

Implication 6: Organizations that encourage employees to engage in proactive behaviours, which reduce the need for direct leadership, may weaken the firm's leadership development opportunities and capabilities.

Directions for future research

Research interest in proactive behaviours has been growing in recent years (Crant, 2000; Grant & Ashford, 2008). This is not surprising given that organizations operating in dynamic and competitive markets increasingly need employees who can anticipate problems and address them head-on, rather than just passively carrying out their formally assigned job responsibilities. Indeed, for many organizations today, it is expected that the ability to attract and retain proactive workers may represent a source of sustainable competitive advantage. Not surprisingly, prior research on proactive behaviour has frequently sought to identify its antecedents, and the few studies that have examined the outcomes of proactive behaviour have largely emphasized its positive consequences for individuals and organizations (Grant & Ashford, 2008).

However, in order to provide a more balanced view of proactive behaviour, we explored some of the potentially negative implications of these behaviours both for individuals and the organizations for which they work. Specifically, using a resource lens, we proposed that proactive behaviours may contribute to employee stress, particularly among employees who lack proactive tendencies or the traits that facilitate specific types of proactive behaviour. We also argued that proactive behaviour could contribute to inter-employee tension when co-workers disagree about the appropriateness of proactive behaviour. Furthermore, we explored the possibility that encouraging proactive behaviour may cause harm to organizations by undermining their ability to socialize employees and foster their culture. Finally, we suggested that expecting proactive behaviours could inadvertently lead to the weakening of an organization's learning capability and its ability to develop leaders.

The implications we have described bring to mind a number of avenues for future research that might further explore the positive, negative, and context-dependent consequences of proactive behaviours at work. Therefore, we highlight some of these ideas below.

Tradeoffs involving proactive behaviours

In the first section of this paper, we described how expecting proactive behaviours from employees could create stress for those who lack resources to be proactive. Although this view is consistent with COR theory, we recognize that other work suggests this may not always be the case. In particular, research in the area of energetic resources (e.g., Kahneman, 1973; Matthews *et al.*, 2002; Meijman & Mulder, 1998) indicates that demanding tasks do not always cause stress. Indeed, a study by Hockey (1997) found that the mode of control (active coping, strain coping, or passive coping) influenced the way individuals reacted to demanding situations. People who used active coping were more energetic, alert, enthusiastic, and engaged. Although this does not necessarily contradict the ideas presented in this paper (i.e., active coping is more likely to occur when individuals have sufficient resources, while strain coping is more likely to occur when individuals lack resources), future work might benefit from incorporating other theoretical frameworks when considering the benefits and drawbacks of proactive behaviours.

Moreover, previous work has also noted that there are often rewards associated with being a proactive employee (Grant & Ashford, 2008). In future studies, therefore, investigators should seek to better understand the tradeoffs that employees make in terms of the potential rewards and costs associated with these behaviours. In particular, while previous research has often posited linear relationships between proactive behaviours and outcomes, it would also be worthwhile to examine the possibility that proactive behaviour is related to certain outcomes in non-linear ways. Indeed, there could be a curvilinear relationship between proactive behaviours and outcomes like job satisfaction, compensation, and promotions, such that individuals begin to derive diminishing or even negative returns for engaging in very high levels of proactive behaviours. For example, the outflow of resources needed for increasing levels of proactive behaviours may exceed the inflow of resources gained from rewards associated with proactive behaviours. Furthermore, when employees engage in very high levels of proactive behaviour, it may increase the likelihood that they make misguided decisions that are seen as more harmful than helpful by supervisors, peers, and other stakeholders and, consequently, such behaviours could be associated with negative outcomes rather than positive ones.

It is also worth noting that the risks and costs of proactive behaviours may be offset by rewards of a more intrinsic nature. For example, employees who work in organizations that value and encourage proactivity may experience an increased sense of autonomy and might find their work more meaningful. This may serve as a source of intrinsic motivation to engage in proactive behaviours even when extrinsic rewards are absent. Therefore, future studies should also explore how intrinsic rewards could affect the way employees respond to expectations of proactivity.

Short-term versus long-term effects of proactive behaviour

More research is also needed before we fully understand the long-term effects of proactive behaviours. Indeed, throughout this paper, we have suggested that the same proactive behaviours that have positive short-term benefits could also lead to negative outcomes in the longer term. Previous longitudinal studies on proactive behaviours in organizations have generally looked at antecedents of proactive behaviours, rather than their outcomes (e.g., Fay & Sonnentag, 2002; Fedor & Rensvold, 1992; see Morrison, 1993b, for an exception). One possible time frame to examine proactive behaviours is

the year following organizational entry. During this time period, it is possible that employees will be frequently rewarded for proactive behaviours, but as time passes, rewards for proactive behaviour may diminish. Moreover, while these proactive behaviours may initially be viewed as a sign of individual initiative, later on they may be seen by some managers as meddlesome or as more trouble than they are worth.

In addition to considering individual outcomes of proactive behaviours over time, there may also be organizational consequences. As mentioned earlier, job descriptions are increasingly likely to specify the need for employees to be proactive (Campbell, 2000). The attraction–selection–attrition framework (Schneider, 1987) suggests that an organization's workforce tends to become homogeneous over time. On the one hand, this may be beneficial for the organization, as many employees would value proactivity, thereby reducing the potential for conflict between proactive and non-proactive employees. On the other hand, by attracting and selecting proactive individuals, an organization may create an environment that aggravates some of the problems we discussed in this paper, such as increasing the organization's dependence on its employees. Thus, organizations that focus on attracting and selecting workers who will behave proactively may accelerate the loss of their capabilities. The use of longitudinal studies should allow researchers to better address these types of questions and better understand how proactive behaviours may contribute to (or detract from) organizational effectiveness – or be seen as contributing to organizational effectiveness – in the short run versus the long run.

Considerations regarding types and quality of proactive behaviours

One limitation of this paper is that we have taken a very broad view of proactive behaviours. It is possible, though, that the potentially negative implications we have discussed here may be more or less true of some proactive behaviours than of others. For this reason, additional work is needed to better understand how different types of proactive behaviours may have greater potential benefits and costs with regard to individual and organizational effectiveness. For example, some types of proactive behaviours may have very few drawbacks and tremendous upsides, others may have only limited benefits with a few potential costs, and others may have costs that frequently outweigh their benefits. Future studies that seek to more completely consider the positive, negative, and context-dependent aspects of specific forms of proactivity would enable researchers to classify proactive acts in this way.

In addition, most measures of proactive behaviours focus on how frequently individuals engage in them. As such, these scales are more concerned with the quantity of proactive behaviours than with their quality. It would be useful, though, to consider how both the quantity and the quality of proactive behaviour may play a role in determining its value to an individual or an organization. For instance, building a few deep relationships may be more useful than simply engaging in high levels of relationship building; similarly, occasionally seeking feedback from a few trusted advisors may be more effective than soliciting feedback in a less discriminating way. Likewise, while some proactive behaviours may contribute to building firm specific resources, others may not necessarily benefit the organization in any way. Indeed, there is a distinction between engaging in voice behaviour to offer suggestions in order to look good in front of a supervisor, and using voice to enact important change in the face of collegial opposition (e.g., LePine & Van Dyne, 1998; Morrison & Phelps, 1999).

Evaluations of proactive behaviour by peers, supervisors, and other stakeholders

Additional studies are also needed to understand how proactive behaviours are viewed by peers, supervisors, and others. In particular, we know far more about why individuals engage in proactive behaviour and how it affects them personally (e.g., in terms of their job attitudes and career success) than we know about the ways in which others view such behaviour. In this paper, we argued that proactive behaviour could contribute to inter-employee conflict if workers feel that their peers are doing too little or doing too much when it comes to proactive behaviour. Nevertheless, a number of related questions remain unanswered. In particular, while it has been frequently argued that organizations need employees who are proactive, such employees may also be more difficult to manage and some supervisors may view certain proactive behaviours as inappropriate or completely unnecessary.

Borrowing from the literature on OCB, it might be especially useful to understand how supervisors (or peers) may react to proactive behaviour when it seems to come at the expense of one's in-role job duties (Bergeron, 2007). For instance, some supervisors may value employees who try to help others or look for solutions to problems at work, while other supervisors may believe that it is better for employees to simply focus on their own job responsibilities. Supervisors who value learning outcomes may encourage proactive learning and tolerate the negative implications it may have for efficiency outcomes (Bunderson & Sutcliffe, 2003), while others may prefer that employees stick to established practices. Drawing upon RDT, we have suggested that proactive behaviours may shift the balance of power in favour of the proactive employee. Depending on their need for power or leadership style, supervisors may also discourage proactive behaviours that reduce their control and make employees more independent.

Likewise, supervisors and peers may react negatively to proactive behaviour that is viewed as poorly timed, poorly executed, or self-serving (Bolino, 1999). It is also possible that supervisors and peers who tend to be proactive themselves are more likely to view the proactive behaviours of others in more positive ways than supervisors and peers who are generally less proactive. Beneficiaries of proactive behaviours may also rate such behaviours more positively than observers. Moreover, previous research has found that supervisors reward certain extra-role behaviours only when they make the individual performing them stand out (Bommer, Dierdorff, & Rubin, 2007). Thus, it is possible that the saliency of proactive behaviours may influence supervisors' evaluations. Other biases such as primacy, or recency, may also affect the evaluations of proactive behaviours. In short, future work is needed in order to more clearly understand when proactive behaviours will be well-received by peers and supervisors and when they are likely to be evaluated more negatively.

Finally, as noted earlier, proactive behaviour is often conceptualized in different ways by researchers, organizations, employees, co-workers, clients, and society at large. It would be useful in future research, therefore, to examine how proactive behaviour may be interpreted and understood differently by different stakeholders. Similarly, future studies could also consider how the divergent interpretations of proactive behaviour may elicit challenges and negative consequences as various stakeholders interact. Indeed, the way in which an individual or stakeholder conceptualizes proactive behaviours may affect the very outcome criteria that are used when evaluating the consequences of proactive behaviour.

Understanding how individual proactive behaviour affects organizational performance

To date, there has been little attempt to explain, theoretically, how proactive behaviours contribute to organizational performance. Likewise, researchers have produced little empirical evidence that the occurrence of proactive behaviours at the individual-level is related to an organization's financial (e.g., return on assets) or market performance (e.g., earnings per share). Clearly, then, more work is needed on both of these fronts. Moreover, it is critical that such research examine the potentially positive, negative, and context-dependent effects that proactive behaviour may have on unit-level or firm-level performance. In other words, rather than assuming that the effects of proactive behaviour are uniformly positive, future studies should seek to understand when proactive behaviours may have minimal effects, negative effects, or very positive effects on organizational performance.

For instance, a central tenet of the literature on proactive behaviour is that it is increasingly important in today's changing business environment. Nevertheless, there are still organizations that operate in relatively stable environments. Future research should investigate what effects, if any, proactive behaviour has for these firms (Griffin *et al.*, 2007). Likewise, some organizations may be characterized by 'proactive behaviour bottlenecks' that prevent employee proactive behaviour from having organizational-level effects. Such bottlenecks could include supervisors who do not value these behaviours and who ignore or fail to implement improvements originating from the proactive efforts of employees. Organizational rules, operating procedures, and structured jobs may also serve as a bottleneck, limiting the effects of employees' proactive acts.

Unfortunately, when an employee's proactive behaviours are frustrated or discouraged by a supervisor this could result in employee withdrawal. Indeed, employees whose proactive behaviours are rebuffed may give up trying to be proactive altogether owing to feelings of reduced self-efficacy or learned helplessness. Finally, some organizational cultures may not encourage proactive behaviours, thereby limiting their observable effects at the organizational level. For this reason, researchers will also need to account for such factors when examining the organizational-level effects of proactive behaviours. Accordingly, we suggest that future studies should seek to provide compelling empirical evidence of the effects of these behaviours on organizational-level variables, and theoretical models should include explanations for why, in some situations, proactive behaviours may not yield the positive outcomes it is often assumed they will.

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