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## Uta K. Bindl and Sharon K. Parker New perspectives and directions for understanding proactivity in organizations

### Book section

**Original citation:**

Bindl, Uta K. and Parker, Sharon K. (2017) New perspectives and directions for understanding proactivity in organizations. In: Parker, Sharon K. and Bindl, Uta K., (eds.) Proactivity at Work Making Things Happen in Organizations. Routledge, New York, USA. ISBN 9781848725638

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This version available at: <http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/68599/>

Available in LSE Research Online: December 2016

*This is an Accepted Manuscript of a book chapter published by Routledge in Proactivity at Work Making Things Happen in Organizations on 03/12/2016, available online: <http://www.routledge.com/9781848725638>*

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# **New Perspectives and Directions for Understanding Proactivity in Organizations**

**Uta K. Bindl & Sharon K. Parker**

The growth of research on proactivity in organizations shows that it is an appealing and important topic in management and organizational research. However, research on proactivity in the workplace has been complex and dispersed, as demonstrated by the chapters in this volume. While each individual chapter is rich in information and insights, and thus stands alone in its value, our focus here is on identifying themes across chapters that we find most interesting and informative for generating future progress in the field of proactivity in organizations. We start by identifying core themes as well as interesting idiosyncrasies in proactivity research thus far, and outline their implications for future research directions. We then summarize what we consider, based on the contributions in this volume, to be the most important practical implications of the research for promoting a more proactive workforce. We conclude this volume by encouraging future avenues of proactivity research that go beyond the scope of what proactivity researchers have thus far predominantly focused on.

## **CORE THEMES AND IDIOSYNCRACIES IN PROACTIVITY RESEARCH**

In reviewing the contributions of this volume, it is apparent that some aspects of proactivity are rather indisputable. All of the researchers in this volume agreed the need for, and importance of, studying proactivity in light of the nature of modern workplaces. For instance, De Stobbeleier et al (in this volume) noted that dynamic workplaces require feedback to be exchanged on a more continuous basis than the traditional annual performance appraisal, hence establishing proactive feedback seeking as a key agenda for contemporary workplaces. Similarly, Sonnentag (in this volume) argued that employees, in modern protean and boundaryless careers, need to agentially develop themselves and their work. Meanwhile, Wang et al. (in this volume) argued that today's complex and unpredictable workplaces evoke the need for employees to adapt to change as well as self-initiate change in their jobs.

Likewise, Ong and Ashford (in this volume) put forth that “firms that actively cultivate the proactivity of its middle managers and employees will be better able to deal with hectic, fast-changing and complex environments”. And so on! There is consensus that the changing demands of contemporary organizations highlight the ubiquitous nature of proactivity for achieving both individual and organizational end goals.

In what follows, we illustrate interesting controversies that exist across different domains of proactivity and discuss how different approaches can meaningfully complement and learn from one another. We focus in our discussion on three key parameters that we consider essential in understanding proactivity at work, and that we encourage all future research to explicitly consider in investigations of proactivity: *Time*, *Process*, and *Context*.

### **The Role of ‘Time’ for understanding Proactivity**

All proactivity researchers would likely agree that is important to consider ‘time’ as a relevant parameter when studying proactivity in organizations, although the degree of deliberate emphasis on ‘time’, across different domains of proactivity research, has varied greatly. Indeed, scholars in some domains of proactivity have yet to start considering the role of time. For instance, Belschak and Den Hartog (in this volume) observed in their review of foci of proactivity that “the extant literature on different foci of proactive behavior assumed a static perspective to date” (p. X). Further, those domains of proactivity research that have incorporated the role of time in proactivity, have done so in idiosyncratic ways. We highlight these communalities and differences in the measurement of time in proactivity research next.

#### *Differences of time frame across distinct domains of proactivity*

Of the different proactivity domains, issue selling research (e.g., Dutton & Ashford, 1993) has tended to consider proactivity as occurring over the longest period, explicitly describing issue selling as a ‘process’ or even ‘movement’, rather than a single behavioural act (Ong & Ashford, in this volume). For instance, issue selling research has investigated one

single episode of issue selling environmental issues in the organization over a one year period (Bansal, 2003) or even a six-year period (Howard-Grenville, 2007). Obvious advantages of using such longer time frame for studying proactivity are the inherent dynamics that can occur: proactivity can have different outcomes in the short-term, rather than in the long-term, and implementing bottom-up change in organizations likely requires a significant length of time. However, probably due to the added complexity, researchers in issue selling have not focused on the timing-related micro-dynamics of this overall grand issue selling process, such as: When do issue sellers speak up and raise their issues (Van Dyne, Cummings, McLean Parks, 1995; Liang, Farh, & Farh, 2012)? Does such voice depend on whether individuals are recovered from work (Sonnentag, 2003; Sonnentag, 2015) before they choose to do so on a given day? Here, research within other domains of proactivity that assume very short time dynamics, in comparison, might add to the picture.

In particular, much of the proactive voice literature (Davidson & Van Dyne, in this volume) has been based on laboratory experiments, thus investigating the momentary time dynamics of when individuals raise their ideas to higher-up individuals. Similarly, research on the role of recovery and affective processes for individuals' engagement in proactivity (e.g., Sonnentag, 2003; Cangiano, Parker, & Bindl, in this volume) have contributed to understanding short-term processes, using daily diary research designs to assess how morning affect influences afternoon engagements in proactivity (e.g., Binnewies, Sonnentag, & Mojza, 2009), or how recovery from work over night influences morning engagement in taking charge at work (Sonnentag, 2003). We advocate that, moving forward, proactivity researchers should incorporate these existing insights on time from across distinct perspectives, in particular in closely related domains of proactivity, such as proactive voice and issue selling, to inform an increased understanding of proactive phenomenon in their particular domain.

*Differences of time frame within domains of proactivity*

In other domains of proactivity, the measurement of time has varied extensively even within a given domain or literature – potentially leading to measuring quite distinct phenomenon under the same umbrella. In particular, job crafting research emerged from qualitative, retrospective research on how hospital cleaners increased meaningfulness in their jobs, presumably over an extended period of time (Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001). In contrast, job crafting research drawing on a Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) perspective (e.g., Petrou, Demerouti, Peeters, Schaufeli, & Hetland, 2012; Wang, Demerouti, & Bakker, in this volume), has employed diary designs to measure within-person variations in job crafting on a daily basis. These two distinct approaches to conceptualizing job crafting, through different lenses of time, could complement and learn from one another. For instance, Wang et al. (in this volume) critically noted that some outcomes of job crafting occur quite instantaneously as a result of individuals’ crafting efforts (for instance, experiencing greater needs satisfaction), whereas other outcomes take more time to manifest themselves (for instance, performance in the job, or changes to the overall job design of the incumbent). Likewise, Ong and Ashford (in this volume) recommended for domains of proactivity that have used short time intervals—for instance, job crafting research conducted from a Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) perspective—to consider the more strategic changes that occur in the overall organization. For instance, future research could consider whether short-term engagements in job crafting are more successful (or essential) in times of organizational mergers, downsizing or expansions, when uncertainty in the organization is likely high.

#### *Proactivity dynamics and short-term reciprocal processes*

Of additional importance is the idea that proactivity represents fluctuating and dynamic, rather than constant, intentions and actions of individuals in the organization. Questions that proactivity researchers across domains have begun to ask in this regard are ‘how will proactivity start and stop, how will earlier proactivity shape later actions, and how does

success in proactivity shape future proactivity?'. Speaking to the notion of initiating versus stopping proactive engagement, De Stobbeleir and colleagues (in this volume) argued that individuals will likely start proactively seeking feedback at work when person-environment fit is low. Perceived misfit might inspire individuals to changing the environment or themselves, by seeking feedback on the content of the area of change. The authors also proposed that repeated failure of reducing this misfit may lead individuals to abandon their proactive efforts, and even leave the job or organization altogether. Similarly, in line with previous conceptual work (Ashford & Barton, 2012), Strauss and Kelly (in this volume) argued that proactivity is likely identity-driven, such that employees will choose to engage in proactivity in organizational contexts that are consistent with how they hope for and wish to see themselves as an individual. Importantly, as the authors note, proactive engagements, in turn, may also influence individuals' revised identity at work.

The notion that what drives proactivity may also be an important outcome of proactivity itself has also been discussed in the context of investigating affective experience in proactivity (Cangiano, Bindl, & Parker, in this volume). The authors argued that, in particular, activated positive affect will often promote proactive engagement at work. In turn, activated positive feelings, e.g., of pride and enthusiasm, may result as a consequence of successful proactive engagement and produce upward spirals of proactivity over time. In contrast, Belschak and Den Hartog (in this volume) observed that, negative experiences with a particular focus of proactivity (e.g., failed *pro-organizational* proactive engagements) might lead individuals to change proactive goals to become more pro-self-focused in their expressions of proactivity at work. In this sense, the goals for proactivity may well change within individuals across time, based on their past and ongoing experiences in proactivity.

In sum, all of these considerations imply that what type of proactivity an individual will engage in over time, even within the same job and organization, will likely vary depending

on past experiences with proactivity, goal progress, supports within the environment, and one's personal development as an individual. The dynamics of this process of the disengagement of proactivity at work deserves further inquiry. How many times do you need to fail before quitting? Over which time frame? What role can others in the organization play? For instance, in the context of proactive feedback seeking, does it matter which stakeholders (for instance, supervisors or management vs. colleagues vs. customers or clients) are involved in the failure experience? These sorts of questions highlight the value of considering proactivity as a goal process (and we will return to this point, in a later section), with recognition that proactive goal generation does not always flow automatically on to goal striving, and that reflection processes post-proactivity will shape and drive future proactivity.

*Life span developmental perspectives and long-term development processes in proactivity*

Assuming a more encompassing time frame altogether, research on aging in proactivity (Zacher and Kooij, in this volume) and also career proactivity (Sonnentag, this volume) have employed life span developmental perspectives to understanding proactivity. In these domains of research, the focus of time is on differentiating when and why employees— in their own timespan of tenure in an organization and even throughout their life course – will engage in proactivity at work. For instance, as De Stobbeleir and colleagues (in this volume) also noted, employees' choice of whether to engage in proactive feedback seeking when experiencing a person-environment misfit might depend on what life stage (e.g., being a young parent) and career stage (e.g., being close to retirement) they encounter themselves in.

More paradoxically, researchers in the domain of proactive personality (Crant et al., in this volume), where proactive personality has been defined as a rather stable tendency of individuals to impact on the environment across time and situations, similarly argued that some developments may occur over the course of one's life time. In particular, drawing on theories of personality development (e.g., Caspi et al., 2005), Wu and Li (in this volume),

specifically proposed that “an individual can become more proactive at a dispositional, deep level if s/he encounters an environment that facilitates this tendency over a time period” (p. X). In contrast, as Zacher and Kooij (in this volume) conclude in their extensive review of ageing and proactivity, research suggests that any notable changes in proactive personality within individuals – as a mere function of individuals’ biological age – are rather unlikely.

Finally, one of the core tenets of proactivity is that employees engage in change-orientated action at work. To the extent that employees change their work environment or themselves, time becomes an important parameter to investigate change not only in terms of proactive employees changing the environment – but also the reverse effects of transformed environments on behaviors and performance of these proactive individuals. In this vein, seminal research in the context of the transitioning economy of East Germany in the 1990s by Frese et al. (2007) showed how work characteristics and personal initiative of employees displayed reciprocal effects across four years. Similarly, recent findings over a three-year period demonstrated recursive effects between work conditions (job demands and control) and proactive personality, indicating a complex and dynamic interaction of employees’ proactivity with the external environment, over time (Li, Fay, Frese, Harms, & Gao, 2014).

In sum, several important timing-related issues deserve further consideration in proactivity research. These yield important implications for research methods in investigating proactivity. In particular, where possible, proactivity should be measured as a dynamic process, using within-person research designs that extend over a longer period of time and incorporating multiple observations. Such research should optimally also take into account different layers of the work environment that impact individuals and their goal processes. Finally, investigations that assess individuals’ proactivity across organizational tenures or occupations over an individual’s life course would yield fascinating insights into how



proactivity in organizations may be promoted from a perspective of individuals, and their personal trajectories in proactivity, working for that organization at a given point in time.

### **The Role of ‘Process’ for Understanding Proactivity**

Related, although distinct, to the discussion of ‘time’ in proactivity is the notion that even a single instance of proactivity at work may best be conceived of as a process. In the overall history of proactivity research in organization, the conceptualization of proactivity as a process reflects a more recent development (see Parker & Bindl, in this volume). From the perspective of understanding proactivity as a process, several phases have been identified that include anticipating or envisioning a different future situation, planning to bring about the desired change, the externally observable act of implementing or enacting proactivity at work, and proactivity-related reflection and learning (Grant & Ashford, 2008; Parker et al., 2010; Frese & Fay, 2001). To distinguish these phases is likely important because employees might be motivated to take charge of changing a situation but never engage in implementing this change. Alternatively, employees might proceed to engage in an initiative without having carefully planned for it, rendering the quality of their actions inferior (see Brandstätter et al., 2003; De Vos et al., 2009; Raabe et al., 2007). In sum, a process perspective allows for greater depth in investigating when proactivity will be effective versus when it fails in the workplace, and as we discuss below, different domains of proactivity have discussed the role of process for understanding proactivity at work, in distinct, and largely implicit, ways.

#### *Conceptualizing proactivity as a process*

Some scholars have explicitly adopted a process perspective on proactivity that varies in part from the overall four phases of the proactive process that we outlined below. In particular, of the different domains of proactivity, the issue selling literature has most explicitly investigated the different phases of an overall process, differentiating particularly *issue packaging* from *selling* the issue. However, as Ong and Ashford (in this volume) in

their review of the issue selling literature note, more detailed understanding within the different phases of issue selling is needed. For instance, “issue sellers could perhaps benefit from a better understanding of who they should be talking to, where they should hold these discussions, when the best times to speak up are, and how they should build and maintain coalitional support” (p. XX). In this vein, Davidson and Van Dyne (in this volume) make the case that employees who wish to engage in proactive voice will need to frame their concern or suggestions differently, dependent on the situation they are in – emphasizing the importance of planning considerations of individuals as part of the goal generation process. Empirical research in the voice literature to date has often neglected this idea that voice may represent a process; instead solely conceiving voice as a one-off, one-shot behavioral action.

Similarly, in the context of understanding career proactivity, Sonnentag (in this volume) concluded that both the more cognitive elements of career planning (such as career exploration, goal setting, and developing specific career plans) and the more overt career proactive behaviors (such as networking, finding a mentor, and skill development) independently predict career success. These findings indicate the importance of investigating both parts of the process, rather than assuming career proactivity in one overarching measure. Likewise, Bateman (in this volume) emphasised the importance of the initial step of the process, the generation of proactive goals. The author argued that different proactive goals require explicit investigation in their prediction of proactive behavior, in particular, because proactive goals likely differ largely from organization-provided goals. In this vein, proactive goals are characterized by *behavioral discontinuity*, that is, proactive goals represent “a qualitative or dramatic quantitative change in a performance target and the behaviors required to meet it” (p. XX). Thus, proactive engagement likely involves distinct steps, or a ‘proactive goal ladder’, that enable a translation of proactive goals into enacted proactivity at work (Bateman, in this volume).

Another domain of proactivity research that has explicitly started to focus on the importance of distinguishing proactivity as a process is research on affective experience at work (see Cangiano et al., in this volume). The authors proposed that while most research to date has focused on providing evidence for the importance of feelings (moods and emotions) for the implementation stage of proactivity, other phases in the proactivity process are likely informed by moods and emotions, thus requiring more empirical substantive investigation of proactivity as a process. In this context, some research has begun to investigate how moods at work may encourage vs. demotivate employees from engaging in proactivity, depending on the phase of the proactivity process in which specific feelings occur (see Bindl et al., 2012).

Finally, focusing explicitly on the final phase of proactivity, Parker et al. (2010) included the element of reflection as an important core process of proactivity. These authors argued that reflection can, in some cases, result in learning that is then applied to current or future instances of proactivity. Exactly when and how individuals reflect on their proactivity, and how these reflections feed-back in a dynamic way into the proactivity process, has had relatively little attention, although research suggests such learning occurs: For instance, an ethnographic study on issue selling (Howard-Grenville, 2007) showed how individuals may learn from their past successes and failures, trying out different moves and tactics, to improve their issue selling over time. To understand the reflection process and learning in proactivity more generally, we encourage proactivity scholars to borrow insights from related literatures, particularly, from leadership development. For instance, Lord and Hall (2005) distinguished between three stages of identity-based leader development, encompassing novice to intermediate to expert skill levels, which determine the degree of effort and automaticity individuals will typically use to engage in required behaviors. Research on proactivity could, similarly, incorporate the idea of *proactive novices*, *proactive intermediates*, and *proactive*

*experts* to more comprehensively investigate how individuals choose to engage in the different phases of the proactivity process, as a function of their proactive development.

*Integrating different forms of proactivity within one process*

Across contributions in this volume, it is striking to observe that several authors referred to other forms of proactivity or proactivity domains in this volume as forming subparts, or being somehow linked, with achieving effective proactive outcomes in their own domain. For instance, De Stobbeleir et al. (in this volume) in their chapter on proactive feedback seeking, suggested that feedback seeking might sometimes form the input necessary to prompt or guide job crafting at work (see Wang et al., in this volume). As such, these forms of proactivity may in some cases be subsumed in one overall episode of proactive engagement, where feedback seeking takes on the role of a planning tactic, or initial action, towards implementing job crafting at work. Similarly, Belschak and den Hartog (in this volume) discussed the notion of ‘spillovers’ from proactive behavior with a specific focus, i.e., directed at the organization (pro-organizational), directed at the work group or colleagues (pro-social), or directed at achieving one’s personal fit with the environment (pro-self) to other forms of proactive behavior helping to achieve the same goal. Thus, proactive behaviour addressing a particular focus, such as job crafting and feedback seeking which likely help increase person-environment fit, may occur jointly in one episode of proactivity. In addition, more macro-forms of proactivity may encompass several discrete forms of proactivity in one episode. In this vein, issue selling (Ong & Ashford, this volume) has been conceptualized as “a lengthy, on-going influence process, involving various behaviors such as upward communication, negotiation, social networking, coalition building, and more” (p. XX). In turn, networking and upward communication (e.g., proactive voice), for instance, have been investigated as forms of proactivity, in their own right. To the extent that

proactivity is conceived of as a process, the overarching goal connecting all of these discrete proactive behaviors is to sell one particular issue in the organization.

Finally, as Belschak and Den Hartog (in this volume) noted, distinct domains of proactivity research have implicitly constrained themselves in assuming that specific forms of proactivity are inseparably linked with specific proactive goals, while ignoring the possibility that a specific form of proactivity could well be applied in other contexts: For instance, the concept of personal initiative (Frese et al., 1997) has implicitly assumed a pro-organizational focus of intending to improve the organizational environment; yet, most of the characteristics of personal initiative (to have a long term focus, to be goal-directed and action-oriented, to persist in the face of barriers and setbacks, and to be self-starting and proactive) could be applied, and are very likely important, to the above examples of proactively pursuing feedback and crafting a job, too. Separating the form of the behaviour from its motives or goal intentions may thus facilitate for future proactivity research to build on existing knowledge in domains of proactivity that have thus far been treated in isolation. In essence, we argue that much value arises in continuing to think of proactivity as a way of behaving or a set of interrelated phases or processes that can be applied to multiple topic domains, with an emphasis of increased synthesis of findings across these domains, rather than focusing to study one domain of proactivity in isolation from others (see Parker & Bindl, in this volume).

### **The Role of ‘Context’ for Understanding Proactivity**

It is well established that context shapes the overall occurrence of proactivity, and this is a core theme of this volume (see, in particular, Ohly and Schmitt, in this volume; Den Hartog & Belschak, in this volume; Harris & Kirkman, in this volume). But context also operates in other ways, such as by determining the overall ‘proactiveness’ of proactive behaviors, by rendering salient different motives that, in turn, evoke different forms of proactivity, and by

shaping the relative effectiveness of proactivity. In this section, we highlight communalities and differences of how different proactivity literatures have incorporated the role of context.

*Context shapes the degree of proactivity*

As noted above, a core theme in this volume is that context shapes the degree of proactivity in a workplace. In other words, proactivity researchers have established that key aspects of the work environment facilitate or impede proactivity at work, such as work design, leadership and teams, and climate in the organization (e.g., Baer & Frese, 2003; Parker et al., 2006; Williams et al., 2010). These authors mostly argue that the context shapes the degree of proactivity through shaping individual's motivation (e.g., the can do, reason to, energized to motivational states discussed in Chapter 1; Parker & Bindl, in this volume), although as discussed above, the context might also promote proactivity via aiding the acquisition of relevant knowledge and skills (see, for example, Parker & Wu, 2014).

In an interesting twist on the role of context in promoting proactive behaviour, Bateman (in this volume) proposed a 'gradated dimensionality' of proactive goals, arguing that the degree of proactivity is best understood as a continuous quality, in connection to the context in which it occurs. Bateman (in this volume) concluded that "the greater the personal causation relative to environmental causation, the greater the proactivity" (p. X). In addition, the author cautioned that truly proactive goals are relatively scarce, as revealed, for instance, in goal-related studies investigating the degree of proactivity of goals set by organizational leaders (Bateman, O'Neill, & Kenworthy-U'Ren, 2002). Similarly, in the context of career proactivity, Sonnentag (in this volume) proposed that organizational context determines whether some proactive career behaviors are truly proactive, or not. For instance, companies may already have mentoring programs in place and hence proactively seeking for a mentor might be less proactive in these highly supporting situations. Similarly, Sonnentag (in this

volume) argued that skill development “might be pursued proactively or occur in the context of a mandatory participation in an organization’s training program“ (p. X).

Based on these above discussions, we encourage proactivity research to go back to its beginnings, in this regard: Initial research on proactivity started by carefully developing measures that were validated for proactivity in a given context. For instance, Parker et al (2006) interviewed wire makers to determine exactly what was proactive behaviour within that specific setting, and then used this knowledge to develop a context-specific measure of proactive problem solving. Similarly, Frese and colleagues (1997) developed a contextual measure of personal initiative, largely based on situational interviews etc. Over the years, the trend in proactivity research has moved towards ‘more generally’ assessing proactivity using generic scales of taking charge, voice, feedback seeking, and the like. We encourage future proactivity research to remember that proactivity is a continuum, not a dichotomy, and to consider how truly ‘proactive’ the assessed behaviour is within a given context.

#### *Context evokes different motives and forms*

Several bodies of research on proactivity show that different types of organizational context evoke distinct motives, or reasons, in employees to engage in proactivity at work. For instance, De Stobbeleir and colleagues (in this volume) argued that context (the type of misfit between the proactive individual and the environment) activates distinct motives of proactive feedback seeking. Thus, in cases where demands from the environment exceed individuals’ ability to do the job well, individuals will likely engage in feedback seeking with an *instrumental motive*, whereas in contexts where abilities exceed demands from the environment, employees who engage in feedback seeking will likely do so with an *impression management motive*. The authors also highlighted how leaders, other employees, or highly public events, can render such feedback seeking socially less acceptable.

Similarly, in the context of safety proactivity, Curcurutu and Griffin (in this volume) proposed that researchers need to understand how and why employees will engage in proactive safety behavior. Specifically, the authors proposed that motivational bases matter for proactivity, such that employees may seek to engage in proactivity with a *protection* versus a *promotion* focus, i.e., either aiming to preserve efficiency and correct functioning, or to promote and generate constructive changes and improvements to a given context. In addition, the authors, drawing on socio-technical systems theory, also advanced the distinction of different targets of safety proactivity, differentiating between *person* versus *procedure*-orientated behaviors. Thus, employees may choose to direct safety proactivity mainly at supporting people or at improving procedures in a given organizational context.

Other proactivity literatures have focused on how context renders salience the relevance for proactivity in employees. In particular, issue selling research (see Ong and Ashford, in this volume) has further illuminated the role of context for motivating proactivity, focusing especially on contexts in which individuals are likely to sell issues. For instance, Sonenshein (2006) surveyed employees and identified a broad range of issues that employees have been prepared to raise issues on, including employee-related issues, diversity issues, community issues, ethical issues and environmental issues. Mayer et al. (2013) identified as potentially relevant issues those also relating to public health, politics, human rights and tax policies.

It is crucial to understand how different situations and contexts can elicit or dampen particular motives (or ‘reason to’), which then affect proactive behaviour or its target. In this context, Strauss and Kelly (in this volume) offered an identity-based perspective on why employees engage in proactivity. As the authors argued, individuals may perceive a situation at work as relevant for proactive engagement dependent on whether their personal identity (their unique differences from other individuals), relational identity (role-related relationships at work), or even collective identity (memberships in groups) is activated in the workplace.



Relevant to all of the above discussion is the question of the extent that every context lends itself to proactivity. For instance, while job crafting research has shown that employees in generally creative jobs, such as at Google, may greatly benefit from crafting their jobs (Wrzesniewski et al., 2012), and that bottom-line employees with simplified jobs, such as hospital cleaners, may increase the meaningfulness of their job by imagining themselves as part of the medical team (Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001), the same might not be true for all. Perhaps, investment bankers, surgeons, or nuclear plant engineers should not be as explorative in crafting their jobs. For instance, Harris and Kirkman (in this volume) argued that the most desirable option for medical teams may be to maintain a proactive orientation, whilst not frequently having to engage in overt proactive behaviors. The authors also noted the possibility that there may be ‘too much of a good thing’ in regards to team proactivity, particularly in these regulated environments. Whether and how organizations should best encourage proactivity in high-reliability contexts remains to be investigated in the future.

#### *Context shapes effectiveness of proactivity*

Context also likely matters greatly in shaping how the effectiveness of one’s proactive efforts. Bolino et al. (in this volume), in particular, discussed cases in which proactivity may be harmful, rather than beneficial, to organizations. The researchers concluded, based on an extensive review of the existing proactivity literature, that a large number of individual boundary conditions prevail that determine whether different forms of proactivity result in positive, versus negative, outcomes for proactive individuals themselves, for their coworkers and supervisors, as well as for the overall organization. Importantly, the researchers note that most existing insights on contingencies of effectiveness have been compiled in a rather peace-meal fashion, and future research will need to incorporate more integrative theoretical frameworks that comprehensively explain the effectiveness of proactivity in organizations.

Relatedly, when investigating the core issue of whether proactivity is ‘effective’, from a contextual perspective, the question of ‘effective for whom?’ needs to be considered. For instance, job crafting researchers (Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001; Wang et al., in this volume) have emphasized that job crafting – while most immediately benefiting the job incumbent themselves who aim to increase the meaningfulness of their jobs – might or might not benefit the overall organization, dependent on whether the job crafting efforts are aligned or misaligned with organizational objectives (e.g., Demerouti, Bakker, & Halbesleben, in press). Similarly, recent research on job crafting suggests that individuals with a high avoidance temperament (rather than, approach temperament; Elliot & Thrash, 2010) orientation may be more likely to reduce or eliminate demands from their jobs (Bipp & Demerouti, in press). It is easy to imagine how such type of ‘proactively simplifying one’s job’ may be beneficial for the job incumbent, however, not necessarily for his/her team members (who might need to deal with the demands, in response), nor with the overall organization. In a related vein, Sonnentag (in this volume) additionally noted that career proactivity research has focused mainly on quantity, rather than on quality, of individuals’ career exploration, highlighting the need to consider context in determining effectiveness.

Finally, while the role of context has always been acknowledged to some extent in proactivity research, we would like to propose proactivity research should move deliberately into understanding the role of proactivity ‘in the service’ of resolving particular contexts. In this vein, rather than partialling-out context so as to generalize insights into how typical individuals in typical situations will behave we propose the value of advancing insights into the nature and usefulness of proactivity for specific contexts, including those that go beyond organizational confines. For instance, scholars could use insights from existing proactivity research to consider how proactivity may help resolve the pressing challenges of our times: how to prevent climate change, how to reduce corruption, how to provide a more peaceful

environment, or how to help resolve poverty in this world. There is scope for impact studies and evidence-based policy advice on proactivity, and we encourage proactivity researchers to ‘think big’ and, indeed, to be proactive themselves in daring to challenge the status quo and cross boundaries of intra-disciplinary domains of proactivity research in ways that prove most impactful in helping our society and that may aim as far as improving the future of our world.

## **PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS OF PROACTIVITY RESEARCH**

In this section, we summarize some of the key practical implications of proactivity research that have been discussed by contributors of this volume, to help inform practical application of research evidence, such as through future interventions in organizations. We discuss these themes within the different Human Resources functions to which they apply.

### **Recruitment and Selection for Proactivity**

One of the core implications of the concept of proactive personality (Crant et al., in this volume) is that some individuals have a natural tendency to be proactive across time and situations. In turn, strong evidence on the powerfulness of proactive personality for overall proactive behavior in the workplace implies that organizations could usefully aim to select for this personality trait, especially where proactive behavior is core to one’s job performance. However, there is little or no research that assesses whether assessing proactive personality in the process of personnel recruitment and selection adds value. As Crant et al. (in this volume) note, “we are unaware of any predictive validity studies that have used the proactive personality scale as a selection instrument, but the possibility is intriguing“ (p. XX). An alternative, selection-focused approach to promoting proactivity in organizations could encompass selecting for those types of personality traits that are typically associated with more proactive behavior at work. In this vein, Wu and Li (in this volume) recommend one feasible avenue for organizations that wish to promote proactivity at work is “to recruit people who are more likely to engage in proactive behavior, such as those with higher

extroversion, future orientation, positive self-perception, positive affectivity and proactive personality” (p. X).

However, it is important to add some caveats. First, Crant et al. (in this volume) caution that the effectiveness of proactive personality is likely contingent on individuals’ additional ability to “read a situation” and to understand how proactivity might be interpreted by important stakeholders. Thus, it may not be advisable to simply select for proactive personality but rather, to test and select those individuals who are proactive and also high in situational judgement (Chan, 2006). In addition, research suggests that a part of being able to have a good situational judgment for proactivity certainly also stems from knowing one’s job well, and clearly understanding the implications of one’s actions in the organization. In this sense, selection for proactivity needs to go hand in hand with training and development that facilitate such in-depth understanding of the job and the organization (Parker & Wu, 2014).

In addition, even if proactive individuals are selected, organizational context can still suppress and constrain an individual’s natural level of proactivity. In other words, there is little point selecting a proactive individual and then putting her or him in an environment that stifles proactive action. Research has shown strong evidence for the power of the work environment on proactive behavior, independent of individuals’ proactive personality (e.g., Frese et al., 2007; Ohly & Schmitt, in this volume; Den Hartog & Belschak, in this volume), and, in turn, organizational context should always be considered in connection with selection.

### **Training and Development for Proactivity**

It is also possible to enhance employee proactivity through training and development. Mensman and Frese (in this volume), in particular, reviewed encouraging evidence that interventions or training can increase proactivity of employees (e.g., Raabe, Frese, & Beehr, 2007), entrepreneurs (e.g., Glaub, Frese, Fischer, & Hoppe, 2014), as well as job seekers (e.g., Eden & Aviram, 1993). In this context, Mensman and Frese (in this volume) provided

several important recommendations to organizations on how to train employees to become more proactive. The authors proposed that such training “is possible ... with the development of an active mindset ... which participants then interiorize and refine with the help of action training within and outside of the training situation” (p. XX). They also recommended an evidence-based management approach (e.g., Rousseau, 2012) that largely draws on and includes participants’ own situation at work when training for personal initiative, highlighting the important roles of context and personal experience for developing proactivity at work.

An important consideration that should be made in training for proactivity is to examine which type of proactivity is most relevant for participants, given, for instance, their career stage and position in the organization. For instance, Zacher and Kooij (in this volume) conducted a systematic review of how age relates to different forms of proactive behavior at work. The researchers concluded that younger employees may be more interested in engaging in career-related proactivity, whereas older (50 years +) employees may be more motivated to engage in organization-related proactivity. These findings show that training for proactivity may need to be tailored to the participants’ individual circumstances and preferences at work. Importantly, Zacher and Kooij (in this volume) also concluded that older employees may face prejudices of other organizational members on becoming proactive in the organization. Hence, training for proactivity may need to extend beyond focal employees to include wider organizational development and elimination of biases towards different groups of individuals at work.

Further, although small in number, other studies, too, suggest it is possible to train individuals to be more proactivity. For example, in the context of developing a proactive identity at work (see Strauss and Kelly, in this volume), Strauss and Parker (in press) compared two types of training interventions amongst police officers and police staff. For overloaded individuals, a problem-focused intervention that made salient individuals’

discrepancies between their status quo and their ideal work led to increased individual task proactivity (proactivity directed towards an individual's work tasks). In contrast, and as theorized, a vision-focused intervention that made salient discrepancies between individuals' status quo and an ideal future resulted in greater organization-member proactivity (proactivity directed towards improving the organisation), albeit only for individuals with a future orientation. As well as their unique proactivity elements, both types of training incorporated elements of any successful behavioural change, such as goal setting and action planning.

Importantly, successful proactivity at work may be a function not only of motivation (which has been the core focus of proactivity research thus far), but also of having the skills, knowledge and other resources (e.g., networks) to engage in this type of behavior at work effectively (Parker & Wu, 2014). For example, situational judgment (Chan, 2006), and need for cognition (Wu, Parker, and de Jong, 2014) both predict proactive work behaviour and/or its effectiveness, highlighting a cognitive component of proactivity that has been rather underplayed (see also Parker & Liao, in press, on the proposed value of 'wise proactivity'). Equipping individuals with the requisite knowledge, and motivating deeper or more effective thinking, are likely to be important elements of any training and development efforts.

### **Organizational Design for Proactivity**

Overall, researchers agree that organizational design plays a very important role in influencing proactivity, even for those employees that are dispositionally high in proactive personality. For instance, Wu and Li (in this volume) concluded that "favorable situational factors can play a role in facilitating proactive behavior for people who are prone to be proactive, motivating those who are not proactive in disposition to behave proactively, or/and have a long-term effect in building people's proactivity at a deep, dispositional level" (p. X).

Thus, it may not be sufficient to ‘select’ for proactive individuals, rather, context needs to be designed such that proactivity in staff is facilitated. Next, we summarize some of the core recommendations of contributors in this volume, on how context may promote proactivity:

*Leading for proactivity* (Den Hartog & Belschak, in this volume): The authors argued that supervisors may exert considerable influence in either promoting or stifling proactivity in their subordinates. Thus, the authors overall concluded that “different types of leadership behaviors and leader characteristics (e.g., participative, ethical, supportive, and openness-signaling behaviors, leader mood) can stimulate proactivity whereas other elements of leadership (e.g., dominance, abusive supervision, lack of openness) may stifle employee proactivity” (p.XX). In particular, leaders who engage in role modeling and intellectual stimulation may be seen as signaling their openness to proactivity; similarly, to provide a vision likely enhances subordinates’ willingness to contribute to the organization; through individualized consideration, leaders may enhance perceived safety of proactive engagements in followers; finally, leaders who energize and inspire followers more broadly will create an important motivational pathway for proactivity at work.

*Work design for Proactivity* (Ohly & Schmitt, in this volume): The authors concluded that, in the context of designing work characteristics to promote proactivity in staff, it is advisable to enhance employees’ job autonomy. In this vein, “employees need to be able to make their own decisions on how to plan, schedule their tasks and which methods to use in their daily work. This could be accomplished by reducing unnecessary rules and regulations, eliminating bureaucracy, providing alternative and flexible work arrangements such as telecommuting or by establishing self-managing teams” (p. XX). The authors also cautioned that employees need to be sufficiently trained and qualified in their jobs to become proactive.

*Team design for Proactivity* (Harris & Kirkman, in this volume): The authors recommended that organizations may promote proactivity in teams through different avenues.

First, individual team members could be selected based on high proactive personality, previous proactive performance, as well as high conscientiousness and extraversion. Second, managers should increase team empowerment, as well as create a trusting and psychologically safe environment, and to “engender norms within the team that motivate high levels of team proactivity” (p. XX). At the organizational level, the authors also recommended for the use of team-based human resource policies, for instance, of team-centric rewards, cross-training and staffing decisions (see also Kirkman & Rosen, 1999), and cautioned for the removal of any structural hindrances, to promote greater overall team proactivity in organizations.

Finally, we would like to add a cautionary note to organizations in the context of using these existing insights as a “one size fits all” recipe to create a proactive workforce. What should be clear from our discussion of communalities and idiosyncracies across domains of proactivity is that organizations need to be considered in their unique contexts, to arrive at most effective or utile approaches and interventions to promote a proactive workforce. For instance, although some aspects of organizational design have been argued to overall promote an overall proactive workforce – for instance, job autonomy or transformational leadership behaviors – researchers also suggest that it is important to consider unique characteristics of the organizational context that may facilitate or inhibit proactivity at work. For instance, in non-western countries, transformational and empowering behaviors of leaders may be less effective in promoting proactivity in their followers if employees more generally assume a high power-distance stance in their interactions with authority (Wang et al., in this volume). In sum, these existing insights from proactivity research are meant to provide overarching suggestions for types of levers for proactivity that organizations can generally draw on – however, to use these levers in the most meaningful and effective way will then highly depend on the resources, constraints, and particular context of the organization in question.

## **THE FUTURE OF PROACTIVITY RESEARCH**



In this section, we encourage additional avenues for proactivity research that go beyond the scope of what proactivity researchers have predominantly focused on. In particular, based on the findings from this volume as well as our own observations of proactivity research, we advocate that future proactivity research should focus more substantially on improving measures and assessment approaches, on considering proactivity more greatly as a social phenomenon, as well as to move beyond individual-level proactivity.

### **Improving Measurement and Using Novel Assessment Approaches**

An interesting perspective on the underlying challenges and opportunities of proactivity is provided by research on the most established way of measuring proactivity – ‘proactive personality’ (see Crant et al., in this volume). As the authors report, the proactive personality scale has been used in upwards of 83 published articles in the past 20 years. This scale is poignantly raising the question as to ‘how many items’ do we need to fully measure the concept of proactivity. While the authors originally developed a 17-item scale, researchers have used 10-item versions (e.g., Seibert, Crant, & Kraimer, 1999), as well as six-item or even four-item versions (e.g., Parker & Sprigg, 1999) of the scale. In this context, Claes et al. (2005) showed that a 6-item version of the proactive personality scale was comparable across several different countries, suggesting that this core proactive personality construct is readily assessable even with few items. However, such systematic analyses are largely missing for proactive behavior measures, and future research should carefully investigate the best approaches for assessing the different, in particular for areas such as job crafting (see Wang et al., in this volume), where many different scales has been developed. Other research domains in proactivity have noted that comprehensive measurements of core forms of proactivity, such as issue selling (Ong & Ashford, in this volume) and foci of proactivity (Belschak & Hartog, in this volume) are still missing.

Another question relating to measuring proactivity is the use of originally English-language scales across different languages and in different cultural contexts. Again, the proactive personality scale has been leading in terms of international use, including, as identified by Crant et al. (in this volume) across at least the following languages: Chinese, Dutch, Finnish, German, Italian, Turkish, and Spanish. However, as Crant et al. (and, similarly, Claes et al., 2005) note, different languages and cultures may imply different meanings in overall scores of proactivity. Future research should now explore how different types of proactive behavior differ in their meanings across distinct cultural contexts. For instance, in the context of proactive voice, for employees to score 3 on a 5-point scale of proactively raising suggestions and voicing concerns (see Davidson & Van Dyne, in this volume) may have very different meanings across different cultural settings. Thus, we advocate that research needs to move beyond Western contexts to explore the meaning of proactive behavior at work across national cultures as well as, for instance, in highly distinct economic contexts, such as for employees in emergent economies.

Another area where future research may usefully employ novel paradigms is in the choice of study design: For instance, in the context of proactive career behaviors, Sonnentag (in this volume) argued for using a person-centric approach to understand ‘profiles of proactivity’. In other areas of proactivity research, multi-level approaches may be particularly beneficial. For instance, in the case of issue selling, to the extent that middle managers raise issues that affect the entire organisation, or even society, this form of proactivity may inherently reflect a multi-level nature. Similarly, in the context of organizational safety, Curcuruto and Griffin (in this volume) argued that safety proactivity should be studied not only from the most dominant paradigm of individual behaviors, but also as a team property or even as an organization-wide phenomenon. For instance, the authors argued that team mindfulness may be an expression of safety proactivity on a team level (see also Vogus &

Sutcliffe, 2007) and future research should investigate how safety proactivity across one level of analysis is informed by others. Similarly, team proactivity researchers (Harris & Kirman, in this volume) recommended future research to more explicitly incorporate the multi-level nature of organizations in studying proactivity at work.

Finally, we advocate that proactivity scholars from distinct domains ‘cross-pollinate’ ideas on how best to assess proactivity. Issue selling research has produced excellent examples of process-related research (Ong & Ashford, in this volume); job crafting researchers (from the original Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001, perspective) have used retrospective interview-based study designs; proactive voice researchers have mainly focused on laboratory-based experiments (Davidson & Van Dyne, in this volume); affect research has often used daily diary studies (see Cangiano et al., in this volume); personal initiative researchers have made an excellent use of field experiments and interventions (Mensman & Frese, in this volume); and scholars investigating leadership, work design and team-based proactivity have tended to use longitudinal field studies (Parker, Williams, Turner, 2006; Ohly & Schmitt, in this volume; Harris & Kirkman, in this volume). Most recently, research on proactive personality has even started to incorporate genetic measurements of proactivity, introducing yet another development of assessing proactivity at work (Li et al., in press). Based on this review, we advocate that different domains of proactivity should learn from others in advancing and complementing assessments of proactivity in their own domains.

### **Proactivity as a Complex Social Phenomenon**

Proactivity has mostly been treated as a solitary action, by which an employee takes charge of and aims to implement changes to their work environment or themselves. However, researchers have recognized that employees might, themselves, not be able to implement proactivity without the support or co-operation of colleagues, for instance, in the context of low autonomy work (e.g., Vough, Bindl, & Parker, 2010). In other cases, employees might

need to liaise with colleagues to achieve change in the entire team. For instance, job crafting researchers have suggested the distinction between individual vs. collaborative job crafting, where collaborative job crafting consists of team members jointly determining how to alter task and relational boundaries of their jobs to meet common goals (Leana, Appelbaum, & Shevchuk, 2009). The extent to which individual team members contribute to such team proactivity may also vary. In this context, Harris and Kirkman (in this volume) argued that individual team members might differ in the extent to which they will influence overall team proactivity, dependent both on their individual network position, as well as on the team's social network characteristics, such as its density and centrality (Borgatti & Halgin, 2011). Similarly, findings by Williams and colleagues (2010) indicate that high levels of heterogeneity in proactive personality in teams was associated with unfavourable group norms, and hence lower team proactivity indicating that the social context, through the composition of teams, may overpower individual predispositions to engage in proactivity.

Another example where proactivity will likely be a highly social phenomenon is the engagement in proactivity that goes beyond one's own work environment, such as in the case of proactive strategic behavior. In this context, issue selling research (Ong & Ashford, in this volume) provide good evidence that successful proactivity may well consist of building coalitions with colleagues or other important stakeholders, and that public forums in the organizations may be used to influence top management to approve of one's issue. In turn, it can be argued that social behaviors, such as networking with colleagues, and one's network in the organization may be very important influencing factors, as well as mechanisms, by which individuals enact in their proactivity. For instance, recent research by Sun and van Emmerik (in press) suggests that individuals' political skills, or their ability to influence other people, can impact on the effectiveness of proactive personality for performance. Similarly, a

meta-analysis by LePine and colleagues (2008) showed that teams may be more effective in selling issues to management if they manage their own team dynamics well.

Researchers in this volume have also argued in their different ways that the broader social environment matters for understanding proactivity in individuals. For instance, Wu and Li (in this volume) described how leaders and peers, as well as the overall organizational climate, can help to shape employees' proactive personality over time. Similarly, in the context of career proactivity, Sonnentag (in this volume) argued that it will be important to consider the dyadic relationship of the mentee who proactively seeks out a specific mentor, as well as the mentor's characteristics, in more detail. Similarly, Davidson and Van Dyne (in this volume) argued, drawing on Construal-Level Theory (Trope & Liberman, 2010), that "construal fit (the match between employee proactive voice framing and supervisor construal of the issue) predicts supervisor's sensemaking and judgments of proactive voice effectiveness" (p. XX). Many of these more specific processes remain empirically unclear, highlighting the need for future research to investigate social processes in proactivity at work.

### **Considering Proactivity Beyond Individuals**

Most proactivity research to date has focused on individuals, both in understanding the level of proactivity, as well as in understanding the implications of proactivity in organizations. We encourage future proactivity research to expand its perspective in two core ways: first, to consider proactivity that occurs at the team and even organizational level of analysis and, second, to consider outcomes of proactivity that go beyond the focal proactive individual.

Turning to the former, comparatively little research to date has investigated questions of when teams or organizations as a whole may be more or less proactive. Here, most research has been conducted in the context of team-level proactivity. This body of research is compelling in arguing that proactivity exists at higher levels of the organization and is not

only an individual-level phenomenon. In particular, Harris and Kirkman (in this volume) concluded that team proactive states and behaviors “are based on more than just the simple aggregation of team member characteristics; rather, they reflect collective properties” (p. X).

Some preliminary insights also exist on the construct of organization-level proactivity. For instance, Aragón-Correa (1998) found organizational proactivity to predict greater engagement in more modern environmental activities as well as more positive financial performance (Aragón-Correa, Hurtado-Torres, Sharma, & García-Morales, 2008). Some research has started to try and establish a link between how proactivity at the organization level may impact individual proactivity. In this context, Ramus and Steger (2000) investigated the consequences of organization-level proactivity directed at environmental activities (indicated as the company providing a published environmental policy supporting sustainable actions) and higher individual engagement in environment-related initiatives. Future proactivity research needs to more clearly understand the mechanisms and processes that underlie organizational proactivity.

Regarding the question of outcomes of proactivity, most research has focused on individual outcomes for the proactive individual themselves, such as performance and career success (e.g., Bindl & Parker, 2010, for a review). However, proactive employees often speak out on and raise issues that do not only concern themselves (e.g., Ong & Ashford, in this volume) and have a focus of proactivity that is pro-organizational, in impacting wider organizational processes than influencing their own job (Belschak & Den Hartog, in this volume). Whether these influences are positive for bystanders, such as colleagues and customers, other departments in the organization, or the organization itself is not been sufficiently understood, to date. Even if proactivity meets the issue sellers’ goals, for instance, as Ong and Ashford (in this volume) argue, it might not represent the most effective use of the organizations’ scarce resources to draw it attention to and change processes in the

organization as a response to this individuals' proactivity. Similarly, employees who engage in job crafting to increase meaningfulness in their work by eliminating a task they do not identify with, might well leave this undesirable task to other colleagues who will need to complete it, as a consequence (Wang et al., in this volume), and research has only begun to investigate effects of one individuals' job crafting on colleagues (Tims, Bakker, & Derks, in press).

Similarly, Bolino et al. (in this volume) proposed that proactivity may not always be beneficial. Drawing on the framework of proactivity by Parker and Collins (2010), the authors integrated existing evidence in the literature indicating that any form of proactivity (proactive work behaviors, proactive P-E fit behaviors, as well as proactive strategic behaviors) may result in substantial negative outcomes for proactive individuals, as well as other stakeholders in the organization. The authors additionally concluded that most proactivity research to date has focused on antecedents of proactivity only, and that future research will be needed to fully illuminate the consequences of proactivity at work, in particular, with regard to how proactive employees impact on others in the organization. In this context, the authors noted that "one of the biggest gaps we identified in our review is research exploring the ways in which proactive behaviors may harm coworkers" (p. XX).

Finally, yet another question that remains unsolved is how proactive employees impact on stakeholders outside the organization. As Wu and Li (in this volume) argue, proactive personality can be developed over time through the design of and interaction with one's job. How this change in proactivity from work spills over into individuals' family lives, e.g., in their interactions with friends, spouses and children, and whether this change will represent necessarily a positive change – and from which perspective – remains unclear.

## **CONCLUDING REMARKS ON THE FUTURE OF PROACTIVITY**

As the ancient Greek philosopher Heraclitus once famously remarked, “the only constant in life is change”. To this end, given that uncertainty and change in organizations and, indeed, in the world is likely to remain high, we believe that proactivity in organizations will remain a fascinating and important topic for research in the foreseeable future. We hope that this chapter will help guide future research on proactivity in meaningful ways, and we encourage scholars to remain dynamic, novel, and explorative in their research approaches to proactivity. We also urge scholars to strike a balance between encouraging diverse and novel perspectives and integrating and bridge-building across existing topics and domains in proactivity research. Both of these divergent and convergent future directions are important to stimulate theoretical development at the same time prevent unmanageable proliferation of overlapping constructs. We wish researchers all the best for these future endeavours on understanding proactivity in organizations and on providing recommendations to management, workers, and policy makers on this important topic. And we hope to see, as a result, more individuals and teams making good things happen in organizations and beyond!



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