

Being proactive at work – blessing or bane?

Frank Belschak and Deanne Den Hartog unravel positive and negative aspects of proactive behaviour at work

In most modern workplaces it is not enough for employees to react and adapt to changes in their environment; rather, they need to plan ahead and prepare for potential threats and dangers in the future by taking the initiative today. Research has shown that in general, engaging in proactive behaviour comes with beneficial results. But sometimes employee proactivity may also lead to negative (side) effects, such as increased stress. Employees therefore need to consider the trade-offs between rewards and potential costs of proactive behaviour at work.

questions

Why do most organisations consider proactive behaviour on the part of their employees as key for the success of their organisation?

What are potential reactions of work colleagues and supervisors to an employee who frequently shows proactive behaviour at work?

resources

Bindl, U. & Parker, S. (2010). Proactive work behavior: Forward-thinking and change-oriented action in organizations. In S. Zedeck (Ed.) *APA handbook of industrial and organizational psychology. Vol 2*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.
www.proactivity.group.shef.ac.uk

Imagine the following situation: Your secretary knows you have an important meeting coming up and, without any prompting, prepares a file for you with all the documentation you need, anticipating that you may otherwise forget something. Or, think of a customer service employee in your firm who takes the initiative to suggest changing a standard administrative procedure so it can be done more efficiently and will cost the firm less. Or, consider employees asking their supervisor for feedback about their performance as they want to improve the quality of their work. These scenarios share a common theme: the employees try to anticipate future changes, opportunities or problems and want to prepare for those by taking action today. They are not simply reacting to cues from the environment, but proactively trying to make a difference. In the organisational psychological literature, such anticipatory ('acting in advance'), self-initiated and change-oriented ('making a difference') behaviour is labelled proactive behaviour.

Many organisations see proactive behaviour on the part of their employees as crucial for their survival in today's fast-changing business world with its increasingly complex work tasks. At the organisational level, adapting and reacting to changes in one's environment is not enough; companies need to be proactive to stay ahead of competitors and survive. As a prominent researcher in this field Michael Frese puts it in his 2008 article: 'The word is out: we need an active performance concept for modern workplaces.' Such modern workplaces

need flexible and responsible employees who go beyond narrow task requirements and who approach work proactively. Also, individual careers have changed in the last decade. Employees tend to change jobs more quickly and more often. This reduces the role of any specific employer in managing employees' careers and increases the need for employees to take care of their careers themselves.

In line with these developments in organisations, academic articles such as the review on proactivity at work by Grant and Ashford (2008) emphasise that a new type of employee is needed in times of flat hierarchies in organisations and uncertain, dynamic, highly competitive business environments. This 'new employee' should engage in self-started, future-oriented behaviour without the need for constant supervision and instructions by others. These authors also argue that 'employees do not just let life happen to them. Rather, they try to affect, shape, curtail, expand, and temper what happens in their lives'.

Proactive behaviour can be directed at changing the self (e.g. attaining new skills) or the environment (e.g. making suggestions on how to improve service) and can be contrasted with both passive and reactive behaviour. There is a large range of different task- and organisation-focused behaviours that can be seen as proactive, such as feedback seeking, making suggestions for improvements, or whistleblowing (reporting wrongdoing at one's organisation), but also more self-directed activities, such as managing one's career (e.g. by taking the initiative to attend training that might prove useful at work in the future). All of these activities can be characterised as being self-initiated, change-oriented and future-oriented. There are certainly aspects unique to specific proactive behaviours; for example, proactively seeking feedback is driven by the employee lacking information on performance, whereas making suggestions on improvements in one's organisation is based on the employee having an advantage in information and wanting to share this. Yet scholars on proactivity have

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also identified several drivers, psychological mechanisms and effects that generalise for multiple forms of proactive behaviour. For example, employees who are highly committed to their organisation try to solve problems, develop and implement ideas on improvements in their organisation, take the initiative to share knowledge or help others, proactively search for feedback, and so on.

Research has shown that proactive behaviour – like most other behaviour – is determined both by situational and by personal factors. A 2010 review by Bindl and Parker gives a good overview of these factors. For instance, having more autonomy and freedom to take decisions at work (which is the goal of ‘empowerment’ programmes in companies) stimulates

abilities needed to take initiative. This increases a sense of confidence or efficacy that they are able to successfully affect their environment and, as a consequence of such an increase in experienced efficacy, employees are more likely to show proactive behaviour. There is ample theoretical and empirical evidence that proactive behaviour is strongly influenced by environmental factors.

Knowledge about the situational antecedents of proactive behaviour, such as autonomy and support from supervisors, is valuable as it enables organisations and managers to stimulate such behaviour in their employees. On the other hand, as we experience every day, different people behave differently in the same situation. This also goes for proactivity. Where some

people tend always to be the first to take charge, others are far less likely to anticipate what is needed and show initiative. In line with this common wisdom, researchers have also investigated the influence of dispositional factors on proactive behaviour. Here, researchers have identified a proactive personality trait as a distinct personality factor that is only moderately related to other personality dimensions like extraversion or openness to experience. Proactive personality describes a person’s general tendency towards proactivity and is a personal characteristic that is relatively stable over time and that employees possess to different degrees. Some individuals who score extremely low on the dimension of proactive personality show little

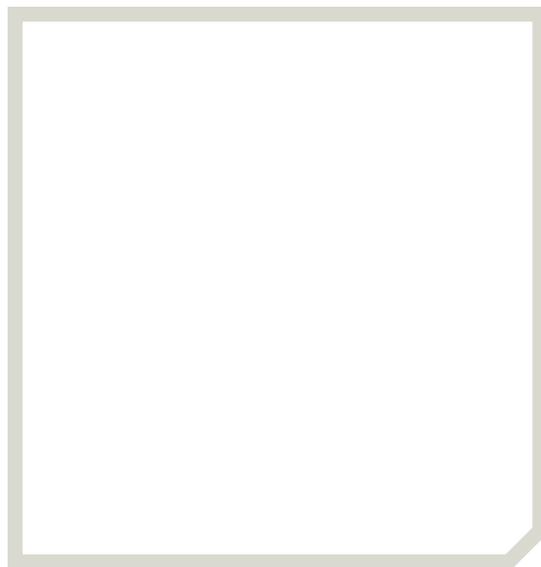
proactive behaviour even in the most stimulating and encouraging environments. Such information on dispositional factors may help

organisations during the personnel recruitment and selection phase to be able to select the proactive employees they need. However, the available research clearly shows that proactive behaviour is more than personality. It is also strongly driven by situational cues, such as job autonomy or a supportive supervisor; traits alone are not likely to be sufficient in all cases to trigger proactive behaviour.

But, what are the consequences of proactive behaviour? And more importantly, are these consequences always positive or are there also potential problems associated with proactive behaviour? In an attempt to shed more light on this question, we and Doris Fay edited a special section in the June 2010 issue of the *Journal of Occupational and Organizational Psychology* investigating positive, negative and context-dependent aspects of proactive behaviour at work. To summarise the main findings upfront, engaging in proactive behaviour is a good thing in general but under certain conditions there may be also some caveats that individuals should consider before investing in these behaviours. In what follows, we use the insights from the work presented in this special section to investigate the potential costs and benefits of employee proactivity and initiative in more detail.

Proactivity as a blessing

Intuitively most people see the benefits of being proactive. As US actor and entertainer Milton Berle notes, ‘If opportunity doesn’t knock, build a door.’ Proactivity was introduced as a scientific concept about 15 years ago and has been investigated under a number of different labels, including Michael Frese’s (2001) concept of personal initiative (taking initiative at work) or Morrison and Phelps’s (1999) idea of taking charge (effecting organisationally functional change). Since then an increasing number of studies have shown the beneficial effects of different types of proactive behaviour at work for individuals, work



Many organisations see proactive behaviour by their employees as crucial

people to make use of this freedom and become proactive. Employees also interpret autonomy granted by their supervisor as a signal that they have the

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proactive behaviour

teams and organisations. These positive effects have been found for a number of different outcome variables, including work performance, career success and individual well-being. Jeffrey Thomas and colleagues recently reanalysed the results of existing studies on proactivity at work, including 103 samples and a total of 32,967 employees, and reported their results in the aforementioned special section. They found strong support for the notion that proactive employees show increased work performance: proactive employees performed better on their core tasks (e.g. generating higher sales volume in the case of salespeople), had more entrepreneurial success, and received more favourable evaluations from their supervisors than their non-proactive colleagues. At the same time, proactive employees were also characterised by higher commitment to their organisation and higher satisfaction with both their job and their career. Overall, proactive behaviour thus seems to lead to a win-win situation in which both the individual employee and the organisation flourish.

One reason for this finding that proactivity has benefits for both employee and organisation may be that proactive employees engage actively in shaping their workplace and organisation so as to better fit their personal strengths, facilitate their performance, and satisfy their needs. For instance, proactive employees might approach their supervisor, seek feedback about their current performance, inform the supervisor about their career ambitions and try to find out what specific factors they would have to focus on to achieve these ambitions. Indeed Seibert et al. (2001) confirmed these ideas in a longitudinal study by showing that employees who displayed career initiative and individual innovations received more promotions and higher salaries than non-proactive employees. Proactive individuals were also more quickly able to obtain a new job after being fired.

These results suggest that individuals who engage in proactive behaviour are more likely to be effective and successful at their work and their career. Is proactivity thus the answer to employees' and organisations' problems alike? Should organisations aim to hire individuals with proactive personalities and try to stimulate their employees to become proactive? Lately researchers have started to caution that such enthusiasm may be premature as there may also be some problems associated with proactive behaviour. We have shown that proactive behaviour may be directed at different targets, including

Proactive behaviours may contribute to employee stress and increase tension between employees

those benefiting the organisation but also one's personal, selfish goals (Belschak & Den Hartog, 2010). Our research evidence suggests that certain situations only trigger proactive behaviour aimed at one specific target (such as enhancing their personal career), which may not necessarily be desirable or advantageous for companies. For instance, supervisors that focus too overtly on fostering their own personal careers rather than the well-being and success of their team, may act as role-models for employees to use proactivity only to foster their own personal interests. In such cases, proactive behaviour may consist only of activities to look for a new, better job and leave the company. Thus, the impact of proactive behaviour may at times be far less positive. What are the conditions under which proactive behaviour may lead to negative outcomes for the proactive individual or the environment?

Proactivity as a bane

In one of the first publications on proactivity Thomas Bateman and Michael Crant (1993) argued that 'misguided' proactive behaviour may lead to undesirable outcomes. Yet, scholars mostly stopped with such short acknowledgments of the possibility of negative (side) effects of proactive behaviour or found negative effects only accidentally while searching for further

support for the positive consequences of proactivity at work. For instance, as mentioned, in their 2001 study on career success Seibert and his colleagues found that several proactive behaviours (innovative behaviour, career initiative) were positively linked to career success. Unexpectedly, however, they also found that one specific type of proactive behaviour – voicing one's concerns at work – was detrimental to an employee's career success: Individuals who voiced many concerns received fewer promotions and lower salaries than those who voiced fewer concerns. A possible explanation for this phenomenon may be found in the 'initiative paradox', a term that Donald Campbell introduced in 2000.

According to the initiative paradox, on the one hand, employers expect their employees to behave proactively; on the other hand, they often punish proactive employees if their proactive initiatives are not in line with the company's values and interests (labelling those types of employee initiatives as 'misguided' behaviours). For instance, voicing too many concerns may be perceived as annoying or undermining by one's supervisor and contribute to an employee's image of being a 'complainer', resulting in bad evaluations. Campbell relates this to the finding that firms often have no use for the whole person and only want those aspects of their employees that are needed for performing efficiently.

In a recent article Bolino et al. (2010)

often seen as 'doing too much' or ingratiating themselves by their peers. This can harm their reputation among colleagues and at times even lead to criticism and retaliation, such as efforts to sabotage the proactive employee's work or attempts to remove the proactive person from the work team. Those who are not proactive themselves may feel threatened by proactive employees who continually rock the boat. Expecting employees to be proactive may therefore enhance tension and conflict if this process is not managed well.

Finally, despite the evidence that shows that proactive employee behaviour generally leads to desirable consequences for the organisation, in some cases proactive behaviour may also harm an organisation's competitiveness and effectiveness. This might especially happen if organisations learn to rely too heavily on employees' proactivity and take their proactive behaviour as a substitute for institutionalised organisational practices. For instance, proactive employees seek out and talk to their colleagues to investigate 'how things are done' within their company and actively search for learning opportunities. As a consequence, organisations may get tempted to reduce (or even drop) (expensive) employee orientation and organisational learning programmes. In both cases organisations run the risk of becoming overly dependent on proactive behaviour on the part of their employees. This may prove a risky strategy given the increased mobility and willingness to change organisations of today's workforce and the scarcity of qualified and proactive employees.

Another interesting issue is raised by Doris Fay and Sabine Sonnentag (2010). These scholars emphasise that the question whether proactive behaviour yields desirable or undesirable effects for the individual or organisation also depends on the time perspective that one assumes. Consider an employee who notices a structural problem at the workplace that the employee tries to solve; for example a sales representative realises that the

purchase instructions on the company website are ambiguous and tries to rewrite this section. In the short run the employee will have to invest a considerable amount of time for this task at the expense of making fewer sales calls and closing fewer deals. In the long run, however, the employee may save time by receiving clearer orders from customers, losing less time in controlling online orders and thus increasing sales volume. Here, proactive behaviour may temporarily interfere with task performance as time needs to be afforded to learn new skills. On the other hand, the reverse process is also possible: Proactive behaviour may yield short-term benefits for an employee while leading to negative outcomes in the long run. Employees may for example make suggestions on how to automate a specific part of the production process and, in doing this, may get a financial bonus for introducing this innovation but make their own or others' jobs redundant in the long run.

Conclusion

Most organisations nowadays expect their employees to do their work not only competently but also proactively. As our short review of the extant research on proactivity at work shows, individuals and organisations alike should be aware of the potential advantages and benefits, but also the potential dangers that come with proactive behaviour. While in most cases proactive behaviour will do more good than harm, especially when managed well, it still seems useful and even necessary to understand the trade-offs that employees make in terms of potential rewards and costs when deciding to engage in proactive behaviour. Ignoring the potential negative implications of proactivity at the workplace may hinder individual as well as organisational welfare and development, whereas well-understood and well-managed proactivity can yield benefits for both parties.

"organisations run the risk of becoming overly dependent on proactive behaviour"

explicitly focus on the 'dark side' of proactivity. They propose several negative implications for employees, and for the firm as a whole, in always expecting employees to behave proactively. Specifically they argue that proactive behaviours may contribute to employee stress, increase tension between employees, and even harm the entire organisation by reducing its learning capability, hindering socialisation processes, and diminishing its ability to develop leaders.

First, engaging in proactive behaviour is likely to challenge the time, mental and physical resources of employees. Proactive behaviour often involves doing tasks or taking responsibilities that go beyond what is formally required from employees and therefore often adds something extra on top of their usual work demands. Unchecked, this may lead to increased work pressure and higher stress levels for employees.

Second, proactive behaviour on the part of one employee can lead to threatening other employees' current or future resources. For instance, the implementation of the suggestions as made by proactive employees may result in extra work for their colleagues who have learned how to take advantage of the existing systems in ways that they will now lose; they even have to spend extra time to get accustomed to a new system. As a consequence, proactive employees are



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