

Protean Career Orientation and Flow: A Conceptual Perspective on Employee Retention in the Hospitality Industry

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Abstract

The changing nature of the modern workplace requires that employees take greater responsibility for managing their own careers. With the hospitality sector being the industries with high turnover, understanding the factors that influence employee retention has become important. This paper aims to provide a conceptual framework for examining the relationship between protean career orientation and the intention to quit, with flow proposed as a psychological mediator. This study integrates Protean Career Theory and Flow Theory, proposing that flow mediates how self-driven and values-driven protean career orientations influence the intention to quit. Protean individuals are suggested to be less likely to leave their organizations because their intrinsic motivation, deep absorption, and meaningful work engagement lead them to experience flow. This study provides theoretical, empirical, conceptual and practical contributions through the proposed framework. The findings suggest that employee motivation and retention can be sustained through creating work environments that foster autonomy and personal growth.

Keywords: Protean Career, Flow Experience, Employee Retention, Conceptual Perspective

Introduction

The modern work environment has faced significant changes due to globalization, technological advancement and evolving societal expectations (Lim, 2023). These transformations have reshaped the nature of work especially in the way individuals view and approach their careers (Kumar & Saxena, 2025). When faced with increased uncertainty and competition, organizations must adapt to their new nature of work as traditional work boundaries are simply not as clear cut as they once were (Deloitte Insights, 2023). Such changes have brought about a change in career expectations. Cortellazzo et al., 2020 highlighted that there is more focus on individuals to take charge of his or her own professional development. As a result, employees must be flexible and acquire new competencies in order to meet organizational needs. It is for this reason that Protean Career

Orientation (PCO) is so pertinent to the way we view modern careers. Protean Career Orientation (PCO) refers to a career approach in which individuals manage their own careers based on self-direction and personal values (Hall, 2004). It focuses on internal satisfaction, like personal growth and psychological success, rather than external markers such as salary increases and career advancement (Briscoe & Hall, 2006). Hall (1976) also proposed that adopting a protean career mindset is crucial in achieving successful career outcomes in the fast-evolving workplace of today. Primary research indicates that individuals with a protean career mindset show higher adaptability and stronger motivation (Kim, 2024; Durão, 2025). One important concept that may explain these positive outcomes is the concept of flow. Csikszentmihalyi (1975) described the 'flow' experience as a state of being completely absorbed in an activity. Csikszentmihalyi and LeFevre (1989) found that employees experience higher satisfaction when they are in a state of flow compared to when they are not. Therefore, understanding flow as a psychological mechanism may provide valuable insight into how Protean Career Orientation (PCO) influences employee retention. This paper reviews Protean Career Orientation by integrating flow that contributes to sustaining employee retention. It also highlights the practical implications of these concepts for various stakeholders in supporting employees in the modern work environment.

Research Gaps

Theoretical Gap

Despite the extensive research on Protean Career Orientation (PCO), several gaps were identified. Existing studies have examined its direct relationships with work-related outcomes such as career satisfaction (Supeli & Creed, 2016; Herrmann, Hirschi & Baruch, 2016), organizational commitment (Ha & Lee, 2022; Oh & Koo, 2021) and psychological well-being (Rahim, 2017; Joshi, Maheshwari & Yadav, 2019). While these findings suggest that Protean Career Orientation (PCO) is associated with positive career outcomes, they provide limited theoretical explanations of the psychological processes through which protean-oriented individuals decide whether to remain in or consider leaving the organization especially when their personal values and work expectations are not aligned.

Empirical Gap

The integration of Flow Theory and Protean Career Orientation within a single framework remains limited, despite the wide use of flow in understanding employee engagement and workplace experiences. Most of the empirical studies on Flow have been focusing on burnout (Kasa, Hassan & Yatim, 2018), job demands (Kasa et al., 2020) and work-family conflict (Kasa & Hassan, 2019b). Despite the valuable insights offered by these studies, they limit the different perspectives and contexts explored in the study of Flow. In addition, empirical studies on Protean Career Orientation (PCO) in Malaysia have mainly focused on fields such as engineering (Rahim & Zainal, 2018; Rahim & Siti-Rohaida, 2015), electrical and electronics (Wong & Mohd Rasdi, 2015; Chin, 2015), and education (Tee, Low & Lau, 2022) with limited focus on the hospitality context. While some studies explored Protean Career Orientation in hospitality (Khan, Salleh, & Hemdi, 2016; Khan et al., 2024), they did not specifically integrate flow as a mediating mechanism.

Practical Gap

Despite its potential to significantly enhance employee work performance, flow is rarely recognized or implemented in the organizational settings. Previous studies have recognized

the importance of job autonomy and meaningful work in maintaining employee motivation (Wan et al., 2018). However, there remains a limited understanding of how Flow can be incorporated as a psychological mechanism to specifically aid in employee retention. Furthermore, individuals with strong Protean Career Orientation (PCO) emphasised autonomy and personal growth, limited study have been conducted to examine how organizational environments can support flow experiences that align with these protean attitudes. This highlights a lack of understanding of how Flow Theory and Protean Career Orientation can be applied together to explain employee retention, especially in the hospitality sector.

Study Objectives

This paper aims to:

- Examine the relationship between self-driven Protean Career Orientation and Intention to Quit.
- Examine the relationship between values-driven Protean Career Orientation and Intention to Quit.
- Examine the mediating role of Flow in the relationship between self-driven Protean Career Orientation and Intention to Quit.
- Examine the mediating role of Flow in the relationship between values-driven Protean Career Orientation and Intention to Quit.

Method

This paper uses a conceptual literature review approach. Relevant literature on Protean Career Orientation (PCO), Flow and Intention to Quit (ITQ) was reviewed and synthesized within the context of the Malaysian hospitality industry. The literature provides the foundation for the proposed conceptual framework.

Theoretical Foundations

Protean Career Orientation (PCO)

The term “*Protean*” derived from the Greek God Proteus, who was known for his ability to change his shape to different situations (Hall, 2004). Hall, Yip and Doiron (2018) conceptualized the protean mindset through the two central dimensions of Protean Career Orientation (PCO): self-driven and values-driven. These two dimensions represent the core of the protean mindset, where individuals not only take charge of their career but also emphasize personal values when managing their careers. The self-driven dimension refers to the extent to which individuals proactively develop their careers (Briscoe & Hall, 2006). Self-driven individuals often show strong autonomy and independence which allows them to take the initiative and take charge of their own career development (Greenhaus, Callanan & Godshalk, 2009). In contrast, the values-driven dimension is defined by “a person’s internal values that provide the guidance and measurement of success for individual career” (Briscoe & Hall, 2006, p.8). This means that values-driven individuals make their career choices based on what they consider to be meaningful instead of external indicators such as a promotion or salary (Hall et al., 2018; Wiernik & Kostal. 2019). Therefore, these two dimensions highlight the shift for career management from organizations to individuals.

Protean Career Orientation in Different Cultures

Protean Career Orientation is shaped by cultural context, especially the differences between individualistic and collectivist cultures. The Western individualistic cultures value autonomy and independence, which encourages individuals to take greater responsibility for their career development (Hofstede, 2001). This perspective aligns closely with the self-driven nature of protean career orientation, in which individuals view themselves as active agents responsible for managing their own careers. This perspective aligns with protean career orientation, where individuals actively manage their own careers. In individualistic countries such as the Netherlands, autonomy encourages self-driven protean attitudes and perceived employability, which may lead them to pursue new opportunities when growth is limited. (Tamontseva & Akkermans, 2025).

In contrast, the Asian collectivist cultures value social harmony, family expectations and responsibilities towards others (Chen et al., 1988; Mok et al., 2020). For instance, research comparing Chinese and American samples shows that Chinese individuals have higher collectivist attitudes, which influence their career decision-making and reduce the emphasis on individual mobility compared to the Western cultures (Kim et al., 2025). Even with a protean career attitude, individuals may be less inclined to prioritize self-driven protean career behaviours. This suggests that Protean Career Orientation differs depending on the cultural values that shape their work perception and decision-making processes.

Flow Theory

Csikszentmihalyi (1990) defined Flow experience as a condition “in which people are so involved in an activity that nothing seems to matter at the time; the experience is so enjoyable that people will do it even at great cost, for the sheer sake of doing it” (p.4). This state is achieved when challenging tasks perfectly align with and utilize an individual's skills and abilities (Csikszentmihalyi & Rathunde, 1993). Bakker (2005) proposed that flow at the workplace is often represented by absorption, work enjoyment and intrinsic motivation. Absorption refers to a state of deep focus in which employees become fully immersed in their work, often losing track of time. Work enjoyment represents the positive emotions such as happiness or satisfaction that employees experience while working on their tasks (Diener, 2000). Intrinsic motivation describes the inner drive to carry out a work task because it is intrinsically pleasurable or satisfying. Flow is recognized as a valuable psychological experience in organizations, often experienced more frequently at work than during leisure (Csikszentmihalyi & LeFevre, 1989). Kasa and Hassan (2017) found flow contributes to organizational outcomes such as increased motivation, better job performance and stronger psychological resistance to work-related stress. When individuals experience flow, they are less likely to have the intention to leave their organizations (Kasa & Hassan, 2016). Hence, this theory serves as a useful framework for understanding the psychological mechanism that influences employee work experiences in the workplace.

Flow in Different Cultures

The experience of flow is varied across the Western and Asian cultures. These differences highlight that the cultural values and work norms influence the perception of work demands and flow experience. From a Western perspective, flow is often defined as a psychological state achieved through participating in externally structured activities that include clear goals, immediate feedback and appropriate balance between challenge and skill (Csikszentmihalyi & LeFevre, 1989). In such contexts, flow is closely related with self-evaluation, as individuals

assess their performance against personal goals and internal standards (Markus & Kitayama, 1991).

In contrast to Western perspectives, Eastern viewpoints propose that the experience of flow may occur under different conditions, including routine or less stimulating activities (Csikszentmihalyi & Asakawa, 2016). For instance, research conducted in Taiwan indicated that individuals achieved flow even with moderate levels of stimulation, suggesting high levels of challenge are not always necessary for optimal engagement (Chen et al., 2010). Similarly, a study involving Chinese participants in Hong Kong observed that flow was most likely to occur during relaxed or low arousal states, rather than highly demanding situations (Moneta, 2004). These findings suggest that flow may not always occur from high levels of challenge but can also arise from culturally shaped perceptions of engagement.

Research Implications

Theoretical Implications

This study contributes to the literature by linking Protean Career Theory (Hall, 2004) and Flow Theory (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990) to explain the psychological processes through which protean career orientation influences intention to quit. While prior studies have examined the relationship between Protean Career Orientation (PCO) and work outcomes such as career satisfaction (Supeli & Creed, 2016; Hermann, Hirschi & Baruch, 2016), organizational commitment (Ha & Lee, 2022; Oh & Koo, 2021) and psychological well-being (Rahim, 2017; Joshi, Maheshwari & Yadav, 2019), this study provides a deeper understanding by emphasizing the mediating role of flow as a key psychological mechanism. By introducing flow as a mediator, it can be a potential psychological mechanism shaping employees' work experiences in the demanding hotel industry. The integration of flow as a mediating variable is theoretically sound, as both Protean Career Orientation (PCO) and flow are grounded in intrinsic motivation and emphasize self-direction in work. By reflecting deep engagement and enjoyment at work, flow reinforces the theoretical foundation of the role of intrinsic motivation as an influence on employees in making their decision to stay or leave the organization.

Conceptual Implications

This study makes a significant contribution by creating a framework that combines Protean Career Orientation (PCO) and Flow Theory to understand the Intention to Quit. This model combines Protean Career Theory and Flow Theory saying that people with these career orientations are more likely to enjoy their work when it aligns with their personal values (Hall, Yip & Doiron, 2018; Hall & Chandler, 2005). In this framework, Protean Career Orientation serves as an antecedent that affects employees' motivation to do their job. Flow is characterised by deep absorption and enjoyment at work. This is a psychological mechanism that connects Protean Career Orientation (PCO) to whether employees want to remain in or leave their organization. Therefore, this conceptual framework gives us an understanding of employee retention in the demanding hotel industry by using Flow to explain the relationship between Protean Career Orientation and Intention to Quit (Kasa et al., 2018).

Practical Implications

This study offers practical insights for organizations, especially for the hospitality industry, to manage employee motivation and retention. Employees who have a strong Protean Career

Orientation (PCO) mindset prefer being able to work independently and meaningfully. They become motivated when their jobs give them the opportunities to develop as professionals. Some earlier research found that when employees have control over their work they feel more responsible and their work becomes meaningful (Wan et al., 2018). Therefore, organizations can get their employees to be more involved in their work by creating a work environment that supports employee career development. In addition, hotels may consider including flow elements into their recruitment and selection processes, such as through digital assessment tools that measure career orientation and engagement tendencies. Human resource managers can use these tools to gather important data on candidates. By using these psychological insights, organizations can select candidates suited for hotel work, which helps them stay motivated and reduce turnover.

Limitations and Future Research

The study is based on conceptual ideas which do not involve empirical testing. The limitation with the study is the inability to confirm the proposed relationships between Protean Career Orientation, Flow and Intention to Quit. In order to examine the proposed framework, future studies should test it to determine the strength and direction of these relationships. Furthermore, this study only looks at the hospitality industry in Malaysia. While this provides us an understanding of this specific context, this limitation may affect the generalizability of the results. These findings may not apply to hotels, areas or industries that have different work environments. Future research is therefore encouraged to apply this framework to other sectors and cultural environments to determine if the relationships between Protean Career Orientation, flow, and intention are the same in different work settings. Moreover, this study specifically looked at the mediating role of Flow in affecting the relationship between Protean Career Orientation and the intention to quit. Future research may explore additional mediating or moderating variables, such as organizational support, leadership styles or job design to get a better understanding of why employees leave their jobs.

Conclusion

As a conclusion, this paper offers a conceptual understanding of the relationship between Protean Career Orientation, Flow and Intention to Quit within the hospitality industry. The changing work nature had expected individuals to be more self-directed and intrinsically motivated. By using flow as a psychological mechanism at work, scholars can better understand the influence of intrinsic motivation and work engagement on intention to quit. The proposed framework contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of employee retention by combining these variables. In the hospitality industry, where the working conditions are often demanding, highlights the importance of understanding work experiences to sustain motivation and reduce turnover.

The current conceptual framework has contributed to the theoretical and contextual understanding of employee retention. For theoretical contribution, this framework combines Protean Career Theory and Flow Theory to show the relationships between self-driven and values-driven of Protean Career Orientation (PCO). By using the psychological flow as the mediator between the two, this study provides a better understanding of employee retention and motivation. As for contextual contribution, this framework applies these concepts specially to the demanding environment of the Malaysian hospitality industry. It offers a more focused perspective on employee retention in this context. The proposed framework not only

serves as a guide for future empirical research but also acts as a practical tool for hospitality management looking to cultivate autonomy and flow in the workplace.

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