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Protean and Boundaryless Career Attitudes in the Modern Workforce: An Integrative Literature Review

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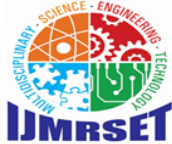
ABSTRACT: The contemporary employment landscape has undergone significant transformation due to globalization, technological advancement, organizational restructuring, and increasing labor market flexibility. These changes have challenged traditional career models characterized by long-term organizational employment and predictable career progression. In response, scholars have developed alternative frameworks that emphasize individual agency, adaptability, and career self-management. Among the most influential are Protean Career Attitude (PCA) and Boundaryless Career Attitude (BCA), which provide valuable insights into how individuals navigate modern career environments. This integrative literature review synthesizes existing theoretical and empirical research on protean and boundaryless career attitudes. The review examines the evolution of career theory, conceptual foundations of contemporary career attitudes, their antecedents, mediating mechanisms, career outcomes, and emerging research directions. The literature indicates that protean and boundaryless career attitudes are associated with increased career adaptability, employability, career satisfaction, subjective career success, and psychological well-being. Evidence further suggests that these relationships are largely mediated by employability, career self-management, networking behavior, adaptability, and psychological mobility. The review highlights the growing importance of individual responsibility in career development while acknowledging the continued influence of organizational and contextual factors. Finally, future research directions are proposed to advance understanding of contemporary career development in increasingly dynamic and uncertain labor markets.

KEYWORDS: Protean Career Attitude, Boundaryless Career Attitude, Career Self-Management, Employability, Career Success, Career Adaptability, Contemporary Careers

I. INTRODUCTION

The world of work has experienced unprecedented transformation over the last several decades. Globalization, technological innovation, economic volatility, organizational restructuring, and the expansion of knowledge-based industries have significantly altered traditional employment relationships and career trajectories (Hall, 2004; Greenhaus et al., 2008). Career development, once characterized by long-term organizational attachment and predictable advancement opportunities, has become increasingly dynamic, uncertain, and individualized. As organizations continue to reduce hierarchical structures and lifetime employment guarantees, employees are increasingly expected to assume responsibility for managing their own careers.

Traditional career models were largely based on stable employment relationships in which organizations provided structured career pathways and employees demonstrated long-term loyalty in return for career security and advancement opportunities. However, contemporary labor markets have challenged these assumptions. Frequent organizational change, evolving skill requirements, and increasing mobility have reduced the effectiveness of conventional career frameworks in explaining modern career experiences (Arthur & Rousseau, 1996; Hall et al., 2018). Consequently, scholars have sought alternative perspectives capable of capturing the complexity of career development in contemporary work environments. Two of the most influential concepts emerging from this transition are Protean Career Attitude (PCA) and Boundaryless Career Attitude (BCA). The protean career perspective emphasizes self-directed career management and values-driven decision-making, positioning individuals as the primary agents responsible for their career development (Hall, 2004). Success within this framework is evaluated through



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psychological fulfillment and alignment with personal values rather than solely through external indicators such as salary or organizational status. In contrast, the boundaryless career perspective emphasizes mobility across organizational, occupational, and geographical boundaries while highlighting the importance of professional networks and opportunities that extend beyond a single employer (Arthur & Rousseau, 1996; Briscoe & Hall, 2006). Contemporary career success is no longer defined exclusively through objective achievements but also through subjective indicators such as career satisfaction, work-life integration, adaptability, and personal growth (Hall, 2004; Hall et al., 2018). These developments have contributed to substantial scholarly interest in understanding how protean and boundaryless career attitudes influence individual career development and organizational outcomes. A considerable body of research has emerged examining the antecedents, mechanisms, and consequences of contemporary career attitudes. Studies have linked protean and boundaryless orientations to employability, career self-management, adaptability, career engagement, subjective career success, psychological well-being, and organizational outcomes (Enache et al., 2011; Herrmann et al., 2015; Nikandrou & Galanaki, 2016; Wiernik & Kostal, 2019). However, findings remain dispersed across different theoretical traditions and empirical contexts. Furthermore, increasing attention has been directed toward understanding how these career attitudes operate in diverse cultural settings and emerging employment arrangements.

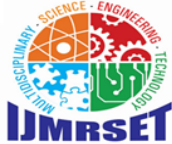
Given the growing significance of contemporary career attitudes in career research and practice, there is a need to integrate existing knowledge and identify key themes that characterize the current state of the literature. This review seeks to address this need by synthesizing theoretical and empirical contributions related to protean and boundaryless career attitudes.

II. METHODOLOGY

This study adopts an integrative literature review approach to examine the growing body of research on Protean Career Attitude (PCA) and Boundaryless Career Attitude (BCA). Integrative literature reviews facilitate the synthesis of theoretical and empirical evidence from diverse research traditions, enabling a comprehensive understanding of complex phenomena while identifying important research trends and knowledge gaps. The review focuses on scholarly contributions examining contemporary career attitudes, including protean careers, boundaryless careers, employability, career self-management, career adaptability, career satisfaction, career success, and related constructs. Foundational theoretical works, empirical investigations, review articles, and recent studies were considered to capture both the historical development and current state of the field. Particular attention was given to studies that have significantly influenced contemporary career theory and contributed to understanding the mechanisms and outcomes associated with protean and boundaryless career orientations. The selected literature was examined through thematic analysis. Recurring concepts, theoretical arguments, empirical findings, and emerging patterns were identified and synthesized into major thematic categories.

III. EVOLUTION OF CAREER THEORY: FROM ORGANIZATIONAL CAREERS TO CONTEMPORARY CAREER MODELS

The study of careers has evolved substantially in response to changing organizational and economic conditions. Traditional career models emerged during a period characterized by stable employment relationships, hierarchical organizational structures, and predictable advancement opportunities. Under this model, employees generally remained within a single organization for extended periods and progressed through predefined career stages. Career success was primarily evaluated through objective indicators such as promotions, salary increases, occupational status, and organizational tenure (Hall, 2004). This traditional perspective was supported by a psychological contract in which organizations assumed responsibility for employee development, career planning, and long-term employment security. Employees, in turn, were expected to demonstrate loyalty and commitment to organizational goals (Arthur & Rousseau, 1996). Consequently, career management was largely viewed as an organizational function rather than an individual responsibility. During the late twentieth century, however, substantial economic and organizational changes challenged the viability of traditional career arrangements. Intensified global competition, technological advancement, workforce flexibility, downsizing initiatives, outsourcing, and flatter organizational structures reduced the prevalence of long-term employment relationships (Greenhaus et al., 2008). These developments weakened traditional career ladders and shifted increasing responsibility for career development from organizations to individuals. In response to these changes, scholars introduced alternative career frameworks that better reflected contemporary employment realities. One of the



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earliest and most influential perspectives was the boundaryless career concept proposed by Arthur and Rousseau (1996). This perspective challenged the assumption that careers occur within a single organizational setting and instead emphasized mobility across organizational, occupational, and geographical boundaries. Boundaryless careers were conceptualized as dynamic and flexible trajectories shaped by opportunities that extend beyond traditional organizational structures. At approximately the same time, Hall (2004) further developed the concept of the protean career. Unlike traditional careers that prioritize external indicators of success, the protean career emphasizes self-direction, adaptability, personal values, and psychological success. Individuals are viewed as active agents who continuously shape their career paths in response to changing circumstances and personal aspirations. Career success is therefore evaluated according to subjective criteria including personal growth, fulfillment, and alignment with individual values. Although developed from different theoretical traditions, both perspectives share several important assumptions. They emphasize personal responsibility for career development, adaptability in response to change, continuous learning, and proactive career management. Together, they reflect a broader transition from organizationally managed careers toward self-directed and flexible career arrangements. These developments have fundamentally reshaped contemporary career research. Rather than focusing exclusively on organizational advancement, scholars increasingly examine how individuals maintain employability, adapt to changing labor markets, and construct meaningful careers within uncertain environments. Protean and boundaryless career theories have consequently become central frameworks for understanding career development in the modern workforce.

IV. CONCEPTUAL FOUNDATIONS OF PROTEAN AND BOUNDARYLESS CAREER ATTITUDES

4.1 Protean Career Attitude

The protean career concept represents one of the most influential developments in contemporary career theory. Hall (2004) defined the protean career as a career orientation in which individuals assume primary responsibility for managing their own careers while making decisions according to personal values and subjective definitions of success. A central feature of the protean career is self-direction individuals engage in continuous learning, career planning, competency development, and proactive opportunity seeking. Such behaviors allow them to adapt effectively to changing labor market conditions and evolving career opportunities (Hall et al., 2018). Briscoe et al. (2006) operationalized Protean Career Attitude through two dimensions: self-directed career management and values-driven orientation. Subsequent research has consistently supported this conceptualization and demonstrated positive relationships between protean orientation and career adaptability, employability, career engagement, and career satisfaction (Herrmann et al., 2015; Wiernik & Kostal, 2019).

4.2 Boundaryless Career Attitude

The concept of the boundaryless career emerged as a response to the growing recognition that contemporary careers increasingly transcend traditional organizational boundaries. Arthur and Rousseau (1996) introduced the concept to describe career patterns that extend beyond a single employer and are characterized by mobility, flexibility, and opportunities that span organizational, occupational, and geographical contexts. Initially, boundaryless careers were often associated with frequent job changes and organizational mobility. However, subsequent research expanded the concept considerably. Greenhaus et al. (2008) argued that boundarylessness should not be understood solely in terms of physical movement between organizations. Instead, boundaryless careers encompass professional networking, knowledge sharing, collaboration across organizational boundaries, and the development of transferable competencies that enhance employability across diverse contexts. Briscoe and Hall (2006) made a particularly important contribution by distinguishing two dimensions of Boundaryless Career Attitude: boundaryless mindset and organizational mobility preference. Boundaryless mindset refers to an individual's openness toward opportunities, relationships, and learning experiences beyond organizational boundaries. Employees with strong boundaryless mindsets actively engage with external professional communities, participate in networking activities, and seek developmental opportunities regardless of organizational affiliation. Organizational mobility preference, in contrast, reflects an individual's willingness to change employers or pursue career opportunities across different organizational settings.

Research increasingly suggests that psychological mobility may be more important than physical mobility in explaining career outcomes. Nikandrou and Galanaki (2016) found that psychological mobility demonstrated stronger relationships with career satisfaction than actual mobility behavior. Employees who perceive themselves as capable of pursuing opportunities beyond organizational boundaries tend to report greater career satisfaction and adaptability regardless of whether they frequently change employers.



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4.3 Relationship Between Protean and Boundaryless Career Attitudes

Both theories developed in response to changing employment relationships and emphasize personal agency, adaptability, continuous learning, and proactive career management (Hall, 2004; Arthur & Rousseau, 1996). Despite these similarities, scholars consistently argue that the two constructs should be regarded as related but distinct dimensions of contemporary career behavior. Protean Career Attitude primarily focuses on internal career management processes, emphasizing self-direction and values-driven decision-making. Boundaryless Career Attitude, in contrast, focuses on career opportunities that extend beyond organizational boundaries and highlights the importance of mobility, networking, and external opportunity exploration (Briscoe & Hall, 2006). Briscoe and Hall (2006) further demonstrated that individuals may exhibit one orientation without necessarily exhibiting the other. For example, a person may be highly self-directed and values-driven while preferring long-term employment within a single organization. Conversely, an individual may frequently pursue opportunities across organizations without grounding career decisions in personal values. This distinction highlights the independent contribution of each construct to contemporary career theory. Empirical evidence supports this conceptual separation. In their comprehensive meta-analysis, Wiernik and Kostal (2019) found moderate correlations between protean and boundaryless career orientations while confirming their distinctiveness as independent constructs. Their findings suggest that although the two orientations frequently coexist, they represent separate dimensions of career behavior and should not be treated as interchangeable concepts.

V. FACTORS INFLUENCING PROTEAN AND BOUNDARYLESS CAREER ATTITUDES

Existing research suggests that Protean Career Attitude and Boundaryless Career Attitude emerge through the interaction of personality characteristics, psychological resources, employability perceptions, social influences, educational experiences, and motivational factors.

5.1 Personality Characteristics and Individual Dispositions

Personality-related factors represent some of the most frequently examined Factors of contemporary career attitudes. Protean and boundaryless career theories emphasize individual agency and proactive behavior, suggesting that employees who possess greater confidence, initiative, and adaptability are more likely to assume responsibility for career development (Hall, 2004; Hall et al., 2018).

Individuals who view themselves as competent, capable, and influential in shaping career outcomes are generally more willing to engage in self-directed career management and pursue opportunities beyond traditional organizational boundaries (Herrmann et al., 2015; Rodrigues et al., 2019). Rodrigues et al. (2019) demonstrated that positive self-evaluations contribute significantly to the development of protean and boundaryless orientations.

5.2 Identity Awareness and Psychological Resources

Identity awareness represents another important factor of contemporary career attitudes. Hall et al. (2018) argued that self-awareness constitutes a critical metacompetency for successful protean career management. Recent research has also highlighted the importance of psychological resources in fostering contemporary career attitudes. Söner and Duru (2025) reported that positive identity perception and psychological flexibility significantly predict self-management behaviors and psychological mobility. Their findings suggest that individuals who possess stronger self-concepts and greater adaptability are more likely to adopt protean and boundaryless career orientations.

5.3 Employability and Career Confidence

Among all factors identified in the literature, employability has emerged as one of the most influential. Rodrigues et al. (2019) found that employability serves as a critical mechanism linking personality characteristics to contemporary career attitudes. Employees who perceive themselves as employable are more likely to engage in self-directed career management and pursue opportunities beyond organizational boundaries. Confidence in one's competencies reduces perceived career risk and encourages proactive career behavior.

5.4 Social Capital and Professional Networks

Social capital refers to the resources individuals obtain through professional relationships, networks, mentoring relationships, and social interactions. Such relationships provide access to information, career opportunities, mentoring, and professional support that facilitate career development and mobility (Greenhaus et al., 2008). Empirical evidence supports this relationship. Rodrigues et al. (2019) found that social capital positively influences both protean and



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boundaryless career orientations. Individuals who maintain broader professional networks are more likely to perceive opportunities beyond their immediate organizational environment.

5.5 Educational Experiences and Career Development Interventions

Han et al. (2025) demonstrated that entrepreneurship education positively influences both protean and boundaryless career attitudes. Students exposed to entrepreneurial learning environments exhibited stronger self-direction, greater openness toward career opportunities, and higher levels of proactive behavior. Hall (2004) emphasized the importance of continuous learning. Employees who participate in developmental assignments may be more likely to adopt self-directed approaches to career development.

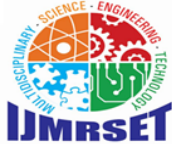
5.6 Motivational Factors and Career Values

Segers et al. (2008) examined motivational influences on contemporary career attitudes and identified several career profiles characterized by different combinations of self-direction, mobility preferences, and career values. Their findings suggest that individuals who prioritize autonomy, personal growth, learning opportunities, and self-fulfillment are more likely to develop protean career orientations. Similarly, individuals motivated by exploration, flexibility, and exposure to diverse experiences are more likely to adopt boundaryless career attitudes.

VI. CAREER OUTCOMES ASSOCIATED WITH PROTEAN AND BOUNDARYLESS CAREER ATTITUDES

The growing interest in Protean Career Attitude (PCA) and Boundaryless Career Attitude (BCA) stems from their demonstrated associations with a broad range of positive career outcomes. Unlike traditional career models that emphasize objective indicators such as salary, promotions, and hierarchical advancement, contemporary career theories place greater emphasis on subjective outcomes including career satisfaction, psychological success, employability, adaptability, and well-being (Hall, 2004). Overall, the literature suggests that individuals with strong protean and boundaryless orientations are better equipped to navigate dynamic career environments and achieve personally meaningful career outcomes. One of the most consistently reported outcomes is subjective career success, which refers to an individual's personal evaluation of career achievement, fulfillment, and progress toward meaningful goals. Hall (2004) argued that psychological success is the central objective of protean careers, while empirical studies indicate that self-directed career management and openness to career opportunities positively contribute to perceptions of accomplishment and professional growth (Enache et al., 2011; Wiernik & Kostal, 2019). Similarly, career satisfaction has been repeatedly linked to contemporary career attitudes because individuals who actively shape their careers often experience greater autonomy, control, and alignment between personal values and career choices (Herrmann et al., 2015; Nikandrou & Galanaki, 2016). Another important outcome is employability, which has become increasingly significant as traditional forms of job security decline. Individuals with strong protean and boundaryless orientations actively engage in learning, competency development, and career self-management activities that enhance their ability to obtain and maintain employment opportunities (Rodrigues et al., 2019). Enhanced employability also contributes to career resilience by enabling individuals to respond more effectively to organizational change, labor market uncertainty, and career disruptions. Research demonstrates that employees with contemporary career orientations are more likely to adopt proactive coping strategies and maintain positive expectations regarding future career prospects during periods of uncertainty (Briscoe et al., 2012). Career adaptability is another outcome strongly associated with contemporary career attitudes. Protean and boundaryless individuals tend to embrace change, pursue continuous learning, and remain open to new opportunities, thereby strengthening their ability to manage career transitions and evolving work demands (Hall, 2004; Hall et al., 2018). Meta-analytic evidence further confirms positive relationships between contemporary career orientations and adaptability-related behaviors, highlighting the importance of lifelong learning and flexibility in modern career development (Wiernik & Kostal, 2019). Beyond career-specific outcomes, contemporary career attitudes contribute positively to workplace well-being and psychological health. Employees who align their careers with personal values and actively manage their professional development often experience greater meaning, purpose, and fulfillment at work (Hall, 2004). Empirical studies have found that protean and boundaryless career attitudes enhance workplace well-being, partly through increased employability and perceptions of career control (Alok & Rajthilak, 2021). Furthermore, proactive coping behaviors associated with contemporary career orientations strengthen psychological resilience and reduce uncertainty-related stress (Briscoe et al., 2012).

Research has also explored organizational outcomes associated with contemporary career attitudes. Contrary to concerns that self-directed employees may demonstrate lower organizational commitment, evidence suggests that



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protean and boundaryless orientations can coexist with organizational engagement when supportive developmental opportunities are available (Hall et al., 2018; Kumar et al., 2023). In contrast, evidence regarding objective career success remains less conclusive. While some studies report positive associations between contemporary career attitudes and traditional indicators such as promotions and salary growth, others find weak or indirect relationships (Tee et al., 2025; Wiernik & Kostal, 2019). This inconsistency may reflect the fact that protean careers prioritize personal fulfillment and values-driven choices over conventional measures of advancement. Consequently, contemporary career attitudes appear to exert stronger effects on subjective career outcomes than on objective indicators of career success. Overall, the literature indicates that Protean Career Attitude and Boundaryless Career Attitude function as important career resources that enhance employability, adaptability, resilience, career satisfaction, subjective career success, and psychological well-being. Their influence is particularly evident in helping individuals manage uncertainty and achieve meaningful career outcomes in increasingly dynamic work environments.

VII. DISCUSSION

This review synthesized existing research on Protean Career Attitude (PCA) and Boundaryless Career Attitude (BCA) to examine their relevance in contemporary career development. The findings indicate that these career orientations have become increasingly important in explaining how individuals navigate dynamic, uncertain, and self-managed work environments. Across diverse contexts, the literature consistently highlights the roles of personal agency, adaptability, employability, and career self-management in shaping career outcomes. A key finding is the shift in career responsibility from organizations to individuals. While traditional career models emphasized organizational support and stable career paths, contemporary career theories position individuals as the primary architects of their careers, requiring greater flexibility, lifelong learning, and proactive career behavior (Hall, 2004; Hall et al., 2018). Within this context, protean and boundaryless career attitudes represent complementary yet distinct perspectives. Protean careers emphasize self-direction, values-driven decision-making, and psychological success, whereas boundaryless careers focus on mobility, networking, and opportunities beyond organizational boundaries (Briscoe & Hall, 2006; Porter et al., 2015). The review further demonstrates that contemporary career attitudes are shaped by multiple factors, including personality traits, psychological resources, employability perceptions, social capital, educational experiences, and motivational influences. Individual characteristics such as proactive personality and positive self-evaluations provide a foundation for these attitudes, while contextual factors such as entrepreneurship education, developmental opportunities, and professional networks further support their development (Rodrigues et al., 2019; Han et al., 2025). Perhaps the most important insight concerns the mechanisms through which career attitudes influence outcomes. Rather than exerting direct effects, PCA and BCA operate through employability, career self-management, psychological mobility, networking behavior, career engagement, and adaptability. These mechanisms encourage skill development, professional networking, career planning, and proactive opportunity seeking, which subsequently contribute to career satisfaction, subjective career success, resilience, and well-being (Enache et al., 2011; Tee et al., 2025; Wiernik & Kostal, 2019). Among these mechanisms, employability appears particularly important, functioning simultaneously as an antecedent, mediator, and outcome of contemporary career attitudes. The review also highlights a shift in how career success is defined. While traditional approaches focused on objective indicators such as salary and promotion, contemporary career attitudes are more strongly associated with subjective outcomes including career satisfaction, psychological success, personal fulfillment, and well-being (Hall, 2004; Hall et al., 2018). Additionally, cultural, organizational, and labor market contexts influence the development and effectiveness of contemporary career orientations, suggesting the need for greater attention to contextual variations in future research (Kumar et al., 2023; Gleissner, 2025). Finally, emerging trends such as remote work, digital platforms, artificial intelligence, and gig employment present new opportunities and challenges for contemporary career development. Given the limited research in these areas, future studies should explore how technological transformation shapes career self-management, employability, professional identity, and career success in evolving work environments.

VIII. CONCLUSION

Protean and Boundaryless Career Attitudes have emerged as influential frameworks for understanding career development in the twenty-first century. As traditional organizational career structures continue to evolve, contemporary workers increasingly rely on self-direction, adaptability, employability, and proactive career management to achieve professional success. The evidence reviewed in this study demonstrates that these career orientations contribute positively to career satisfaction, subjective career success, adaptability, employability, resilience, and well-



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being. A central conclusion emerging from this review is that contemporary career attitudes influence outcomes primarily through behavioral and psychological mechanisms rather than direct effects. Employability, career self-management, networking, adaptability, and psychological mobility serve as critical pathways through which individuals transform career orientations into successful career outcomes. Consequently, understanding these mechanisms is essential for advancing both career theory and career practice. As labor markets continue to evolve in response to globalization, technological innovation, and changing employment relationships, the relevance of protean and boundaryless career perspectives is likely to increase. Future research should continue refining these theories while exploring their application within emerging employment contexts such as digital work, artificial intelligence-driven workplaces, and global career systems. By doing so, scholars can contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of how individuals build meaningful, sustainable, and successful careers in an increasingly uncertain world of work.

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