

# The Double-Edged Sword Effect of Protean Career Attitude on Employee Deviant Innovation

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**Abstract:** Deviant innovation is an important way for enterprises to break through innovation bottleneck. With the reshaping of employment relationship, the self-oriented and value-driven protean career attitude has gradually attracted academic attention. Based on self-determination theory, conservation of resources theory and affective events theory, this paper explores the dual-path mechanism and boundary condition of the impact of protean career attitude on deviant innovation, and constructs a theoretical model: protean career attitude promotes deviant innovation through harmonious work passion and inhibits deviant innovation through workplace loneliness, supervisor developmental feedback positively moderates the relationship between the protean career attitude and harmonious work passion, negatively moderates the relationship between the protean career attitude and workplace loneliness, and moderates the indirect dual-path effect of the protean career attitude on the deviant innovation through the harmonious work passion and workplace loneliness.

**Keywords:** Deviant Innovation, Protean Career Attitude, Harmonious Work Passion, Workplace Loneliness, Supervisor Developmental Feedback.

## 1. Introduction

Innovation is the fundamental driving force of enterprise development. However, there exists a contradiction between employee innovation and organizational restriction in the real management situation. On the one hand, with the goal of gaining competitive advantages, the organization encourages employees to improve their awareness and ability of innovation. On the other hand, the organization will reject seemingly "whimsical" ideas due to limited factors such as strategy, resources and external environment. When employees believe that an idea is feasible and can improve the efficiency of the organization, but do not get formal support from the organization, they will secretly practice the idea through hidden ways, resulting in deviant innovation [1]. The birth of deviant innovation achievements such as LED lighting technology, tape cutting machine and wechat red envelope show that once the deviant innovation with rationality of purpose and illegality of means is successful, it may bring qualitative improvement to enterprises and even the whole society [2]. Although scholars have explored the influence of factors such as self-efficacy [3], perceived overqualification [4][5] and creative role identity [6] on deviant innovation from the perspective of individual cognitive structure, they have ignored the connection between employees' attitude or tendency towards their career and deviant innovation.

Protean career attitude is a career tendency that is independently chosen and managed by individuals and driven by their own values rather than those of the organization [7]. With the accelerated evolution of global changes, instability and uncertainty factors have made the bottom-up rigid hierarchical promotion channels cannot meet the needs of employee career development, involuntary unemployment and cross-border mobility are increasing [8], and the volatile career attitude has returned to the academic field of view. Previous empirical studies have revealed the positive impact of protean career attitude on employee in-role performance

[9][10][11], or its negative impact on employee organizational commitment [12] through a single path. Considering that deviant innovation is a complex of loyalty and treason, the mechanism of the protean career attitude on deviant innovation may be more complex and needs to be clarified.

Thus, based on self-determination theory, conservation of resources theory and affective events theory, this paper introduces harmonious work passion and workplace loneliness as mediating variables and supervisor developmental feedback as moderating variable, explores the dual-path mechanism and boundary condition of the impact of protean career attitude on deviant innovation, and constructs a theoretical model.

## 2. Research Hypothesis and Theoretical Model

(1) Positive path: The mediating role of harmonious work passion

According to self-determination theory, individual behaviors are mainly driven by internal and external motivations [13]. Individuals with protean career attitude tend to set career development goals and control career development process independently [14]. The sense of achievement brought by completing challenging work tasks is an important driving force for career development. In view of this, individuals with a protean career attitude perceive that active commitment to work is motivated by self-actualization rather than by pressure norms or secondary benefits. Therefore, the following hypothesis is proposed in this paper:

H1: Protean career attitude positively affects harmonious work passion.

On the one hand, based on the conservation of resources theory, the strong interest for work shown by employees with high harmonious work passion can continuously provide positive emotional resources for innovation [15][16] and better balance the interaction between internal and external

roles [17]. However, leaders have to reject some high-risk and high-consumption ideas due to scarce organizational resources, which increases the probability of employee deviant innovation. On the other hand, based on the self-determination theory, employees with high harmonious work passion have a stronger degree of internalization of work and are less influenced by external factors such as opposition from leaders and criticism from colleagues [18], so they are more likely to implement deviant innovation. Therefore, the following hypothesis is proposed in this paper:

H2: Harmonious work passion positively affects deviant innovation.

Based on H1 and H2, this paper further proposes the following hypothesis:

H3: Protean career attitude positively affects deviant innovation through harmonious work passion.

(2) Negative path: The mediating role of workplace loneliness

On the one hand, employees with high protean career attitudes are more sensitive to the perception of the matching degree of individual-organizational values and have stronger reactions [19], and when they think that the deviation of individual-organizational values is serious, they will marginalize themselves [20]. On the other hand, employees with high protean career attitudes have a strong sense of competition and are difficult to form intimate and trusting interpersonal relationships with colleagues [21]. Therefore, the following hypothesis is proposed in this paper:

H4: Protean career attitude positively affects workplace loneliness.

As for innovative behavior, based on the conservation of resources theory, employees with high workplace loneliness will consume a lot of cognitive resources to eliminate negative emotions [22], thus inhibiting innovative behavior. In addition, based on the affective events theory, employees with high workplace loneliness are more sensitive to the suggestion of external information, and pay too much attention to insignificant details such as self-reputation [23], thus inhibiting innovative behavior. As for deviant behavior, employees with high workplace loneliness will establish a good image and improve interpersonal relationship through low-cost means such as fitting in and obeying rules [23][24], so as to reduce deviant behavior. Therefore, the following hypothesis is proposed in this paper:

H5: Workplace loneliness negatively affects deviant innovation.

Based on H4 and H5, this paper further proposes the following hypothesis:

H6: Protean career attitude negatively affects deviant innovation through workplace loneliness.

(3) The moderating role of superior developmental feedback

First of all, high-level supervisor developmental feedback will provide constructive information related to growth, which is conducive to employees' access to emotional resources and cognitive resources, and improve the concentration of employees with protean career attitude in their work. On the contrary, low-level supervisor developmental feedback lacks organizational support, which weakens the positive effect of the protean career attitude on harmonious work passion. Besides, high-level supervisor developmental feedback is conducive to employee psychological security [25], alleviating the competitive pressure between employees with protean career attitudes and colleagues, and improving interpersonal relations. Conversely, low-level supervisor developmental feedback causes employees with protean career attitudes to push themselves too hard, exacerbating their sense of workplace loneliness. Therefore, the following hypothesis is proposed in this paper:

H7: Supervisor developmental feedback positively moderates the impact of protean career attitude on harmonious work passion, that is, the higher the level of supervisor developmental feedback, the stronger the positive impact of protean career attitude on harmonious work passion, and vice versa.

H8: Supervisor developmental feedback negatively moderates the impact of protean career attitude on workplace loneliness, that is, the higher the level of supervisor developmental feedback, the weaker the positive impact of protean career attitude on workplace loneliness, and vice versa.

Based on H7 and H8, this paper further proposes the following hypothesis:

H9: Supervisor developmental feedback positively moderates the mediating effect of harmonious work passion on the relationship between protean career attitude and deviant innovation, that is, the higher the level of supervisor developmental feedback, the stronger the positive effect of protean career attitude on deviant innovation through harmonious work passion, and vice versa.

H10: Supervisor developmental feedback negatively moderates the mediating effect of workplace loneliness on the relationship between protean career attitude and deviant innovation, that is, the higher the level of supervisor developmental feedback, the weaker the negative effect of protean career attitude on deviant innovation through workplace loneliness, and vice versa.

In conclusion, this paper constructs a theoretical model including the dual-path mechanism and boundary condition of the impact of protean career attitude on deviant innovation, as shown in Figure 1.

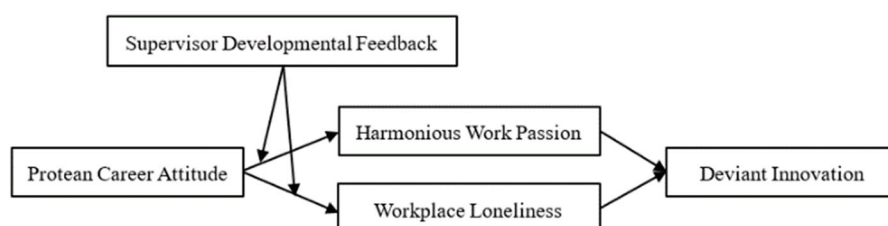


Figure 1. Theoretical Model

### 3. Conclusion and Discussion

Based on self-determination theory, conservation of resources theory and affective events theory, this paper logically deduces the dual-path mechanism and boundary condition of the impact of protean career attitude on deviant innovation. This paper suggests that the protean career attitude positively promotes deviant innovation through harmonious work passion, negatively inhibits deviant innovation through workplace loneliness, and the superior developmental feedback plays a moderating role.

The conclusion of this study has important theoretical and practical significance for expanding the perspective of exploring deviant innovation and volatile career attitude, and guiding organizations to more fully understand and effectively manage employee deviant innovation and protean career attitude.

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