

LA ADAPTABILIDAD ORGANIZACIONAL: UN APORTE CONCEPTUAL PARA LAS ORGANIZACIONES CONTEMPORÁNEAS

ORGANIZATIONAL ADAPTABILITY: A CONCEPTUAL CONTRIBUTION FOR TODAY'S ORGANIZATIONS

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RESUMEN

Las organizaciones contemporáneas enfrentan mercados cada vez más turbulentos y mutables del punto de vista tecnológico, económico y social, necesitando dar respuestas adaptadas para que se mantengan productivas y para sobrevivir a las presiones que esos mercados ahora les ejercen. Los cambios y presiones que emergen del entorno en que las organizaciones se encuentran son cada vez más frecuentes y rápidos, presentando importantes desafíos para las organizaciones. El concepto de adaptabilidad de carrera y respectivas dimensiones (la preocupación, el control, la curiosidad y la confianza), centrado en el individuo y que decoren del abordaje teórico de carrera propuesto por Mark Savickas, proporciona un marco con potencial de transposición y de aplicación a las organizaciones. El artículo presente tiene como objetivo proponer la adecuación de este concepto a las organizaciones, dando paso a un nuevo concepto, el de adaptabilidad de organización. Las intervenciones psicológicas deberán abordar este concepto para promover un mejor ajuste entre los recursos de adaptabilidad de los trabajadores y las necesidades de adaptabilidad de las organizaciones. La adaptabilidad, en última instancia, puede ser una variable importante para mejorar y aumentar la disponibilidad y los recursos de una organización para enfrentar los cambios previstos, o actuales, que presentan los contextos de trabajo turbulentos.

Palabras clave: Adaptabilidad, cambio, carrera, organizaciones, recursos

ABSTRACT

Current organizations face markets which are technologically, economically and socially changing and increasingly turbulent. These trends imply more adaptable responses so that organizations' can maintain their productivity and survive to the pressures of such markets. The changes and pressures of the organizations' environment are more frequent and rapid, adding important challenges to the organizational structures. The career adaptability concept (and its dimensions concern, control, curiosity and confidence) theoretically proposed by Mark Savickas and which is centered at the individual, offers a framework with potential to be transferred and applied to organizations. The present article aims to demonstrate this concept's adequacy to the organizations, giving place to a new concept of organizational adaptability. Psychological interventions should address such construct, in order to promote a better fit between workers' adaptability resources and organizations' adaptability needs. Adaptability can, ultimately, be an important psychological and organizational variable to improve and enhance an organization's readiness and resources to cope and manage with anticipated or current changes presented by turbulent work contexts.

Key Words: Adaptability, change, career, organizations, resources

Challenges and changes for today's organizations

Organizations and work markets have been substantially changing during the last years, since economical and social contexts face growing adaptation demands due to globalization and to rapid technological changes (Berntson, Sverke & Marklund, 2006). The liberalization of trade in financial markets, communications and transports had a significant impact on organizations and also on how work is experienced across the world (Arnold & Cohen, 2008). For organizations, such events increased the competition and forced large scale restructuring (Creed & Hood, 2009). Since the nature of the work changes due to such pressures, profound effects will inevitably happen in the way organizations' structure and operate themselves (Furnham, 1997, 2005). The essence of management is, thus, the ability for cope with change (Chakravarthy, 1982).

Arnold and colleagues (2010) sustain that several changes have been occurring widely at the western world, such as: (a) increasing work load for individuals (number of hours and necessary effort), (b) organizational changes with elimination of hierarchical levels and reduction of the number of workers, (c) the even more global competition (organizations from the western countries need to control costs and enhance their workers' competencies), (d) team-based work (individuals with different knowledges' join together to develop a project), (e) more short-term contracts, with renewal been the exception rather than the rule, (f) more frequent changes in the aptitudes required, (g) more part-time work, (h) changing work-force, due to the decrease of the birth rate and the increase of life span, (i) more self-employment and employment at small organizations, (j) working from or at home due to the advancements in communication technology and the costs' reduction to the employers and (k) increasing pressure in the retirement pension's schemes.

With more flexible and dynamic work settings, it is important to stress out that flexibility as to do not only with the relationship between organizations and their environment, but it also applies to the relationship between organizations and their members (Berntson et al., 2006). In order to cope with the fast changing world, organizations have been cutting staff and costs (*downsizing*), hiring other services (*outsourcing*), diminishing hierarchical levels (*flattening*) and restructuring (*restructuring*), and, thus, careers have been changing radically (Savickas & Baker, 2005). Economical and technological developments can result in unpredictable careers due to the changing job market and

opportunities (Kuijpers & Scheerens, 2006), with significant impact in the types of careers available within organizations and at individual enactment (Arnold & Cohen, 2008).

Change and need for adaptation are, thus, primary features of the functioning of organizations and have implications both for organizations and workers. Organizations need to perform at a high level of efficacy and efficiency in order to cope with present and future challenges. Since adaptive strategies are circumstantial, useful solutions in the past might be poor models for success, satisfaction and innovation to the new challenges presented by the environment. Now, the key concept is the one of adaptability.

Career adaptability by Mark Savickas

Until the second half of the past century, society has provided a narrative individuals' used to mentally structure their work life and to better understand themselves and others (Savickas, 2002, 2005). The career concept of Super (1963; Super, Savickas & Super, 1996) synchronized individuals with their culture by telling them in advance how their work life should be carried out and what society expected from them, that is, which developmental tasks they should fulfil. Such developmental tasks were powerful anticipations used by individuals to project life trajectories or pathways (Savickas, 2010). Although this career narrative is currently still useful, other narratives are now emerging.

According to Savickas (2005), as global economy, information technology and social justice of post-industrial societies challenge dominant narratives, new narratives or stories will no longer focus on progression throughout an orderly sequence of predictable tasks in a maxicycle. Instead, they will increasingly focus on minicycles that emphasize adaptability for transitions and change. Savickas (2010) states the need for a career construction approach in order to understand how individuals' interpret and represent the tasks presented by a certain context, what meaning they assigned to it and how they integrate such representations on their story and personal career construction. Thus, this is an approach centered at the individual.

Career construction incorporates three perspectives (differential, developmental and dynamic), representing the three classic segments of career theory - individual differences in traits, developmental tasks and coping strategies, and psychodynamic motivation - under the central concepts of personality types, career adaptability and life themes (Savickas, 2005).

Career adaptability as becoming an essential characteristic of modern world workers, which must continue to adapt themselves to changing demands and opportunities in workforce in order to maintain productive and profitably employed (Hartung, Porfeli & Vondracek, 2008). Better outcomes (adaptation) are expected for individuals that are willing (adaptivity) and able (adaptability) to perform behaviours that address changing conditions (adapting) (Porfeli & Savickas, 2012; Savickas & Porfeli, 2012).

According to Savickas and Porfeli (2012), adaptation is motivated and guided by the goal of setting in harmony internal needs and external opportunities and is declared through success, satisfaction and development. Adaptation is a consequence of adapting, implying mastering the vocational development tasks, coping with occupational transitions and adjusting to occupational traumas and contingencies through five sets of behaviours: guiding, exploring, establishing, managing and disengaging. Adaptivity is a psychological style, a personality trait of flexibility or willingness to change. However, regardless of how it is defined, this personality trait itself is insufficient to support adaptive behaviours. The individual willing to engage in adapting behaviours should bring self-regulation resources that influence the change of the situation, that is, adaptability

resources or psychosocial strategies (Savickas & Porfeli, 2012). Due to the changeable nature of individuals' and their contexts, a person's adaptivity, adaptability, adapting, and adaptation are in several stages of activation, and the changes at the person-environment harmony are both cause and consequence of such activation (Savickas & Porfeli, 2012).

Savickas (2005) defined career adaptability as a "psychosocial construct which denotes an individual's readiness and resources for coping with current and imminent vocational development tasks, occupational transitions, and personal traumas" (p. 51), that is, the coping processes through which individuals' connect themselves to their communities and construct their careers

Adaptability is different from adapting (to do, behaviour) and adaptation (constant transitory state or outcome), and refers to an individual's readiness and resources to cope with current or anticipated tasks, transitions and traumas in occupational roles which, in some degree, changes its social integration (Savickas, 1997, 2005; Savickas & Porfeli, 2010). Such readiness is considered a trait progressively stable and enduring of the individual, revealed through the motivation or the willingness to meet the imbalances and career transitions with adaptive responses, and individuals differ in such readiness to affect change (Savickas & Porfeli, 2010). As for resources, they are self-regulation capacities or strengths that individuals' can use to solve unfamiliar, complex and ill-defined problems presented by vocational tasks, occupational transitions and work traumas. Such resources are not at the core of the individual but rest at the intersection of person-in-environment, being psychosocial. They help individuals to form strategies to direct their adaptive behaviours, shaping a style of adapting (Savickas & Porfeli, 2010, 2012).

Career adaptability integrates four dimensions and it is organized into a structural model with three levels (Savickas, 2002, 2005). At the highest and most abstract level there are the four dimensions, each named according to its function: concern, control, curiosity and confidence. At the intermediate level, the model articulates a set of three variables – aptitudes, competencies and beliefs – common to each of the previous dimensions, which shape the concrete coping behaviours to master developmental tasks, negotiate occupational transitions, and solve personal trauma. At the most concrete level there are the vocational behaviours, which denote the numerous coping responses that produce vocational development and construct careers (Savickas, 2005). Thus, adaptability is currently use to explain how individuals manage and adjust themselves to the multiple career transitions as they advance into the development stages of each position, occupation or context they face (Del Corso, Rehfuß & Galvin, 2011).

Concern is considered the most important of the four dimensions. It means future orientation, to feel that it is important to prepare for tomorrow and to develop planning competencies considering past experiences, present and future (Savickas, 2005; Savickas & Porfeli, 2012). It is the planful attitude and the belief in continuity (Savickas, 2005) fostered in hope and optimism (Savickas et al., 2009, 2010/2011). Without this sense that the future is real and can be prepared, individuals feel pessimistic and indifferent. Including anticipated events in such future makes it real and usually enhances the sense of continuity that connects present behaviour to future outcomes, increasing optimism about the practicability of goals.

Control means that individuals feel and believe they are responsible for constructing their careers, even if they consult significant others. The attitude and belief in decisiveness dispose individuals to engage in developmental tasks and to negotiate their occupational transitions – that is, making a personal decision (Savickas, 2005) –, through self-discipline, effort and persistence (Savickas & Porfeli, 2012). Nowadays, individuals face a growing number of decisions, as they seek for balance between work demands, roles, tasks, family needs and personal interests (Del Corso et al., 2011). Proactive behaviours such as decision making and reward postponement increase the sense of interpersonal autonomy and personal agency, and without such sense of control individuals' do not feel they can change their own destiny (Savickas, 2003). To understand

this dimension it is important to know the culture to which the individual belongs, since the perception of control in different if one considers more individualistic or collectivistic societies (Savickas, 2003).

Curiosity refers to the attitude of inquisitiveness that disposes individuals' to scan and explore the environment in order to learn more about themselves and situations. It allows the acquisition of knowledge that can help them to make more suitable and realistic decisions that fit self to situation (Savickas, 2005). This sense of curiosity addresses not only the individual, but also what surrounds him, with the purpose of developing ideas or strong beliefs about how life should be lived (Savickas, 2003). Adaptive conceptions about the process of choice lead to adequate and viable choices throughout career, as well as to the search for intrinsic gratification in work (Savickas, 2003).

Confidence denotes feelings or beliefs of self-efficacy concerning an individuals' ability to successfully solve a problem or execute a course of action needed to make and implement suitable career choices (Savickas, 2003, 2005). It arises from solving problems encountered in daily activities and it can move individuals from establishing goals to achieving the fulfilment of goals and roles, easing behaviours that allow mastering developmental tasks (Savickas, 2003). How an individual adapts himself and solves complex career problems determines how able he is to achieve career goals (Del Corso et al., 2011).

Consequently, the adaptable individual is conceptualized as (a) becoming concerned about the future, (b) taking personal control about the vocational future, (c) revealing curiosity by exploring possible selves and future scenarios and (d) strengthening the confidence to pursue one's aspirations (Savickas, 2005; Savickas & Porfeli, 2012). Hartung and Borges (2005) characterize such dimensions emphasizing their relationship with the future: concern deals with issues of having a future, control has to do with owning the future, curiosity means being realistic about the future and confidence refers to the ability to construct the future and overcome obstacles. However, development across these four dimensions progresses at different rates and such disharmony produces individual differences in career choice, as well as variant patterns of career development (Savickas, 2005).

Adaptability from an organizational perspective: integrating constructs and contexts

Adaptability is one of the most relevant characteristics for a higher competitiveness in nowadays world of work – especially in situations of change – both for individual and organization. The increasing environmental dynamism and the organizations' adaptability have received a new academic interest on how such organizations adapt to their environment and create a higher business performance (Tuominen, Rajala & Möller, 2004).

From an economical approach, adaptability is considered a feature of the organization's production system, being the inherent ability to adjust or modify its cost performance according to the demand (Katayama & Bennett, 1999). Other authors propose a broader definition, presenting adaptability as the ability of an agent to consciously or unconsciously change to fit different circumstances, assuming that agents can be both passive and active (accepting the environment as it is or seeking to influence it) (Busquets, Rodon & Wareham, 2009). For Chakravarthy (1982), adaptability is the ability of an organization's to identify and capitalize emerging markets and technology opportunities. It is also seen as a key prerequisite of innovativeness (Tuominen, Rajala & Möller, 2004).

Adaptability construct proposed by Savickas (2003, 2005) focus on the individual. However, its versatility and applicability might also be extended to a more macro level, that is, to organizations, resembling what happens in other theoretical approaches. An example of the applicability of constructs both to individuals and organizations is John Holland's (1959) RIASEC model of types (Realistic, Investigative, Artistic, Social, Enterprising and Conventional), each one comprising a set of interests, values and abilities. Both individuals and environments can be appraised considering their resemblance to each type (Holland, 1959). By considering their resemblance to each personality type, individuals' make an effort of self-organization of their skills, interests, values and abilities which, by its turn, defines a pattern of congruent or incongruent link to a certain work environment (defined by the same types) (Savickas, 2005). Satisfaction, stability and achievement depend on the congruence between the individual's personality and its work environment.

Likewise, it is theoretically feasible the assumption that, as individuals can be described in terms of career adaptability and its dimensions (concern, control, curiosity and confidence), such construct can also be applied to the organizational setting. Organizational adaptability would denote the readiness and resources of an organization to cope with current or anticipated tasks and demands according to its functioning, and to cope with transitions and key events experienced throughout its existence. According to their mission, business approach, organizational goals and values, and even the leadership styles of their leaders or managers, organizations can also be described in terms of concern to plan the future, control or ability to make and carry out necessary choices, curiosity to explore realities and internal and external opportunities and confidence to manage, solve and cope with challenges of survival, productivity and profit in the current market. So, psychological interventions (such as recruitment, training, counselling, and organizational planning) should also address such construct, in order to promote a better fit between workers' adaptability resources and organizations' adaptability needs. Organizational psychologists can play a role by identifying which workers are already (or need to be) skilled in adequate adaptability resources that fit adaptability organizational profile and needs, allowing workers' satisfaction and organizational survival in demanding and changing work settings.

FINAL REMARKS

In economical and organizational environments increasingly dynamical and changeable, organizations need to re-establish stability and maintain continuity, in order to ensure their productive processes and enhance competitiveness in their target market.

Tacit or explicit rules of behaviour and performance at organizations, denoted through the goals to be accomplish and the values/mission assumed by the organization among its employees, can provide guidelines for adaptability strategies and resources. It is feasible to propose that organizational culture addresses issues of organizational adaptation to the environment.

The construct of adaptability proposed by Savickas to describe individuals' career adaptability presents potential to be also applied to the macro-organizational context, considering its definition and operationalization. Thus, adaptable organizations can be described according to how they express and anticipate *concern* about their continuity and future; increase *control* considering their survival and future regardless the market conditions; reveal *curiosity* by identifying business opportunities resulting from internal potential that enhances their attractiveness for investment and anticipated external scenarios (work market and economic trends); and reinforce the *confidence* to pursue and maintain organizational goals.

In the future, it is important to develop research in order to address the applicability of the adaptability construct and its dimensions (proposed by Savickas) to the organizational context. Also, it is important to develop qualitative and/or quantitative research methodologies and measures for data collection and assessment. Such adaptability dimensions can also prove to be relevant areas for identifying and defining organizational needs and future interventions. Thus, adaptability can be an important contribution to improve the readiness and resources of organizations to cope with anticipated or current changes presented by turbulent work contexts and to guide such organizations in developing adequate organizational strategies.

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