

Sustainable careers in the context of solo self-employment – A qualitative study

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Purpose. Contemporary labor markets are characterized by rapidly growing numbers of solo self-employed workers (i.e., people who have their own business without employing employees) (Kozica et al., 2014; OECD, 2016). Solo self-employment is characterized by limited social security, potentially resulting in high levels of precariousness in their long-term careers. So far, however, research on solo self-employed workers has predominantly focused on the decision to *move into* self-employment. Hardly any studies have investigated what happens *after* launching a business, particularly the consequences for the sustainability of solo self-employed workers' careers (e.g., Burton et al., 2016; De Vos et al., 2020). To improve our understanding on how solo self-employed workers can protect themselves against precariousness, we examine patterns of career self-management behaviors among solo self-employed workers in light of their career sustainability.

Methodology. We conducted 102 semi-structured interviews with Dutch solo self-employed workers about their engagement in career self-management behaviors and the perceived sustainability of their careers. We examined a heterogeneous sample of solo self-employed workers across industries, business ages, and education levels, to account for potential unique barriers or enabling factors in their context.

Results. Preliminary results reveal four profiles that show differences in engagement in career self-management behaviors, in terms of *type of behaviors* (i.e., proactive vs. adaptive vs. passive), *drivers of career self-management behaviors* (i.e., intrinsic vs. extrinsic) and their *time perspective* (i.e., short-term vs. long term focus):

- (1) *Proactive crafters* - frequent engagement in various career self-management behaviors (e.g., training and development, networking, coaching and reflection, and goal-setting behavior), predominantly driven by intrinsic motivation to create

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and maintain person-career fit, and as such taking both short-term and long-term perspective.

- (2) *Adaptive crafters* – frequent engagement in various career self-management behaviors (e.g., training and development, networking, and goal-setting behavior), predominantly driven by external market demands, both applying a short-term and long-term perspective.
- (3) *Survivors* – infrequent engagement in a limited variety of career self-management behaviors. Survivors mainly invest in networking and collaborating with other solo self-employed workers to fulfill short-term external market demands. They are less interested in the long-term perspective, and hence rarely engage in training and development, and goal-setting behavior.
- (4) *Passive balancers* – infrequent engagement in a limited variety of career self-management behaviors. Passive balancers engage in career self-management behaviors only when they feel forced to, to balance their anticipation of market demands and fulfillment of their personal needs in terms of maintaining work-life balance and person-career fit.

Limitations. This study has a cross-sectional design meaning that the potential impact of the factor time has not been included. As careers evolve over time (De Vos et al., 2020), it would be relevant to examine whether the identified profiles are subjected to changes over time.

Research & practical implications. By identifying profiles that are characterized by a distinct pattern of engagement in career self-management behaviors, we also found differences in the sustainability of solo self-employed workers' careers and related precariousness. For example, the *survivors* seemed to be more at risk compared to the *proactive crafters*. Therefore, this study supports policy makers to develop tailor-made interventions, which will most likely enhance the effectiveness of these policies, and promote sustainable careers among the solo self-employed workers (Burke, 2015).

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