

# Towards a better understanding of internal barriers triggering career inaction: an interview study

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**Context.** Many countries' labor market today is characterized by low job mobility, while at the same time, many people are not very satisfied with their career. One potential explanation for this contradictory situation lies in the occurrence of career inaction, i.e., the phenomenon that people have a tendency to delay career decisions and/or fail to take sufficient action to realize a desired career change (Verbruggen & De Vos, 2020). As Verbruggen and De Vos (2020) theorize, career inaction can have serious consequences for individuals and organizations. For instance, research shows that there are important well-being (e.g., more burnout) and performance (e.g., more counterproductive work behavior) risks when people do not accomplish a desired change in their career—which applies when people feel stuck or locked-in in their current job (e.g., Allen, Peltokorpi, & Rubenstein, 2016), do not realize their turnover cognitions (e.g., Verbruggen & van Emmerik, 2018), or are “wantrepreneurs” (i.e., people who talk about starting their own business without doing anything to realize it; Hotur, 2015). Periods of career inaction may thus create substantial constraints for the sustainability of people's career. Given these risks, it is imperative to better understand when and why career inaction occurs. We aim to do so by investigating the internal barriers that withhold people from acting on a need or desire to make a change in their career (as opposed to external barriers, such as financial constraints) and how individuals can be helped to overcome these internal barriers.

**Method.** We are currently conducting interviews with 40 employees. All interviewees followed internal career counseling with their organization 6 to 18 months prior to the interview. We opt for this group since employees who followed career counseling have voiced a need or desire to make a change in their career. Despite this need or desire, however, not all of them succeed to act on it, even after following career counseling. Interviews are analyzed using an inductive approach, which involves moving iteratively between our data, the literature, and our own emergent theoretical insights.

**Results.** Primary analyses show that, in line with the theory of career inaction (Verbruggen & De Vos, 2020), emotions (e.g., fear), cognitive biases (e.g., sunk cost bias) and cognitive complexity interfere with the process of taking action on a desired change in one's career. Contextual factors (e.g., lack of spousal support) can make these internal barriers more pronounced. In addition, differences were found in explanations given for current inaction compared to explanations for past inaction.

**Discussion.** The findings of this study both confirm, enrich, and extend the recent Theory of Career Inaction. By shedding light on factors triggering inaction, this study provides concrete suggestions as to how individuals can be helped to overcome career inaction.

## **References**

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