



Job apathy in employees: The role of personality traits and perfectionism

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Abstract. Apathy is a serious threat to the well-being of employees and organizations, but so far it has been little studied in the job context. The construct of job apathy includes two components: apathetic thoughts and apathetic actions. Apathetic thoughts comprise the lack of interest in and satisfaction from one's job. Apathetic actions mean the lack of intention to perform well. Employees just do what they must do without putting meaningful effort into fulfilling their tasks. *Purpose.* The study aims to examine the predictive role of perfectionism and personality traits in job apathy. *Method.* Three hundred and twenty Russian employees (56.2% females) with mean age of 38.57 years ($SD = 9.80$) completed the Russian versions of the Job Apathy Scale, Short Almost Perfect Scale, and Short Portrait Big Five Questionnaire. *Findings.* A series of linear regression models showed that age, extraversion, agreeableness, and openness to experience were negative predictors, whereas gender and maladaptive perfectionism were positive predictors of job apathetic thoughts. Age, agreeableness, and openness to experience were negative predictors of job apathetic actions. Overall, perfectionism and personality traits partly predicted job apathetic thoughts and actions among Russian employees. *Implication in practice.* These findings can be used to measure maladaptive perfectionism in the employee selection process, develop coaching and mentoring programs and career counseling, provide support to employees with maladaptive perfectionism and low extraversion, agreeableness, and openness to experience.

Key words: job apathy, adaptive perfectionism, maladaptive perfectionism, personality traits.

Introduction

Apathy is a serious threat to the well-being of employees and organizations, but so far it has been little studied in the job context. The concept of job apathy was coined in 2015 when the Job Apathy Scale was developed by G. Schmidt. Job apathy is defined by him as a feeling of low motivation and decreased interest in one's job (Schmidt et al., 2017). It is a type of selective apathy because an individual with job apathy can pursue their hobbies, be actively engaged in family activities or enjoy other pastimes outside their workplace (Marin, 1990). The construct of job apathy includes two components: apathetic thoughts and apathetic actions (Schmidt et al., 2017). Apathetic thoughts comprise the lack of interest in and satisfaction from one's job. Apathetic actions mean the lack of

intention to perform well. Employees just do what they have to do without putting meaningful effort into fulfilling their tasks.

Though job apathy can significantly predict workplace constructs and organizational outcomes, very little empirical research has been done on this construct in the work settings (Abd, Behadili, 2019; Enwereuzor, 2023). It has been shown that it is positively connected with job withdrawal behaviors, professional burnout and organizational deviance while being negatively connected with employee engagement, job satisfaction and personal initiative (Schmidt et al., 2017; Ugwu et al., 2019; Zolotareva, 2020).

The reasons why job apathy arises are still unknown. It does not need to result from job-related stress but might relate to a number of personality traits (Alarcon, 2011). To our knowledge, no research exists in this domain to date. Thus, the aim of this study is to improve understanding of the job apathy concept by investigating a range of personality traits (Big Five, perfectionism) that could be associated with it.

Personality variables: the Five Factor Model, perfectionism

The Five Factor Model of personality has been widely used for examining the trait-relatedness of organizational phenomena (Vergauwe et al., 2015). This model includes such traits as neuroticism, extraversion, openness, agreeableness, and conscientiousness (John, Srivastava, 1999). Neuroticism exhibits an emotional mood and excitability. Extraversion expresses characteristics of sociality and mobility. Openness relates to imagination, new ideas' acceptance, and mental curiosity. Agreeableness indicates trustworthiness and altruism. Conscientiousness reflects self-discipline and a tendency to be responsible. (McCrae, Costa, 2008).

Perfectionism is defined as an excessive striving for excellence combined with an over-critical attitude to one's results (Stoeber, Otto, 2006). It considerably influences attitudes and behaviors at the workplace (Harari et al., 2018). However, the multidimensional nature of perfectionism brings both benefits and drawbacks for employees and organizations. On the one hand, adaptive perfectionists demonstrate stronger work engagement, striving for flawless performance and higher level of job motivation (Ozbilir et al., 2015). By contrast, maladaptive perfectionists are prone to higher level of job-related stress, job burnout and workaholism (Stoeber, Damian, 2016).

Hypotheses

We propose the following hypotheses:

1. *Adaptive perfectionism is negatively correlated with job apathetic thoughts and job apathetic actions.*
2. *Maladaptive perfectionism is positively correlated with job apathetic thoughts and job apathetic actions.*
3. *Extraversion, openness, agreeableness, and conscientiousness are negatively correlated with job apathetic thoughts and job apathetic actions.*
4. *Neuroticism is positively correlated with job apathetic thoughts and job apathetic actions.*

Method

Procedure

All participants gave informed consent to participate in the study. The study was conducted in accordance with the Helsinki Declaration (seventh revision, 2013).

Participants

Three hundred and twenty Russian employees (56.2% females) with mean age of 38.57 years ($SD = 9.80$) took part in this study. The participants were recruited by mailing the electronic addresses of former HSE University students. All volunteers filled out a Google form questionnaire, assessing job apathy, perfectionism, and personality traits. Participants were not rewarded for participating in this research.

Measures

Outcome variables

Job apathy was measured with the **Job Apathy Scale (JAS)** (Schmidt et al., 2017). The JAS is a 10-item self-report measure assessing two dimensions: apathetic thoughts (e.g., 'My mood at work could be described') and apathetic actions (e.g., 'Producing work of average quality is good enough'). Participants were instructed to indicate the degree of agreement on each item using a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 ('disagree') to 5 ('agree'). The JAS has shown adequate psychometric properties in Russian adult workers (Zolotareva, 2020). In the current study, the Cronbach's alpha were 0.89 and 0.78 for apathetic thoughts and apathetic actions, respectively.

Predictor variables

Perfectionism was measured with the **Short Almost Perfect Scale (SAPS)** (Rice et al., 2014). The SAPS is an 8-item self-report measure assessing two dimensions: standards (e.g., "I have high expectations for myself") and discrepancy (e.g., "I have a strong need to strive for excellence"). The items were rated on a seven-point Likert scale ranging from 1 ('strongly disagree') to 7 ('strongly agree'). The SAPS has shown adequate psychometric properties in Russian college student (Wang et al., 2016). In the current study, the Cronbach's α were 0.61 and 0.67 for standards and discrepancy, respectively.

Personality traits were measured with the **Short Portrait Big Five Questionnaire (BF-10)** (Egorova, Parshikova, 2016). The BF-10 is a 10-item self-report measure assessing five dimensions: extraversion (e.g., "He is sociable and full of energy"), agreeableness (e.g., "He is friendly and helpful"), conscientiousness (e.g., "He is usually collected, disciplined and does not like to break the generally accepted rules"), neuroticism (e.g., "He is anxious, easily upset"), and openness (e.g., "He is open to everything new, it is interesting to be with him"). The BF-10 has a male and female version. Participants were instructed to indicate the degree of similarity on each item using a six-point Likert scale ranging from 1 ('not similar') to 6 ('very similar'). The internal consistency was evaluated using Spearman-Brown coefficients. This type of reliability coefficient is used as an analog of the Cronbach's α for two-item subscales (Eisinga et al., 2013). In the current study, the Spearman — Brown coefficients ranged from 0.33 to 0.64. Such modest reliability coefficients are sufficient for 10-item scales based on the Big Five (Guido et al., 2015).

Statistical analysis

We performed all statistical analyses using IBM SPSS Statistics (version 27).

Analytic plan

Firstly, the participants' socio-demographic characteristics were examined. Secondly, descriptive statistics and correlation matrix for all study variables were calculated. Thirdly, multivariate regression analyses were used to assess age, gender, perfectionism, and personality traits as risk factors for job apathy.

Results

Table 1 presents the participant's socio-demographic characteristics. Most participants (56.2%) were females. Their age ranged between 20 and 68 ($M = 38.57$, $SD = 9.80$). Participants' education level

was relatively high, with 76.3% having completed a college or academic degree. Most participants were married or lived with a partner (68.5%), most of them were parents (61.6%).

Table 1. Participants' socio-demographic characteristics ($N = 320$)

Characteristics	$M (SD)$	$N (%)$
Age	38.57 (9.80)	
Gender		
Male		140 (43.8)
Female		180 (56.2)
Work experience	16.63 (9.60)	
Marital status		
Married		158 (49.4)
Living with a partner		61 (19.1)
Single		89 (27.8)
Other		12 (3.7)
Parental status		
No children		123 (38.4)
One child		97 (30.3)
Two children		79 (24.7)
Three children		14 (4.4)
Four children		7 (2.2)
Education		
Secondary general		16 (5)
Secondary vocational		44 (13.7)
Incomplete higher		16 (5)
Higher		212 (66.3)
Two or more higher		28 (8.7)
Post graduate degree		4 (1.3)

Table 2 summarized the descriptive statistics and intercorrelations for the study variables. Gender, discrepancy, and neuroticism were positively associated with apathetic thought ($0.13 < r < 0.25$), while extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, and openness were negatively associated with apathetic thought ($-0.23 < r < -0.42$). Furthermore, age, standards, extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, neuroticism, and openness were negatively associated with apathetic action ($-0.15 < r < -0.37$).

Table 2. Means, standard deviations, and correlation matrix

Variables	M	SD	1	2	3	4
1. Apathetic thought	1.99	.91				
2. Apathetic action	2.52	.84	.70***			
3. Standards	17.04	3.23	-.07	-.15**		
4. Discrepancy	14.24	3.60	.24***	.09	.47***	
5. Extraversion	3.83	.90	-.33***	-.23***	.06	-.21***
6. Agreeableness	4.58	.93	-.42***	-.30***	.10	-.16**
7. Conscientiousness	4.77	.90	-.23***	-.22***	.18***	-.09
8. Neuroticism	2.88	1.12	.25***	-.18***	.01	.26***
9. Openness	4.25	1.02	-.37***	-.37***	.20***	-.20***
1. Age	38.57	9.80	-.09	-.19***	-.17**	-.11
11. Gender			.13**	.01	.02	-.05

	5	6	7	8	9	10
1. Apathetic thought						
2. Apathetic action						
3. Standards						
4. Discrepancy						
5. Extraversion						
6. Agreeableness	.20***					
7. Conscientiousness	.12*	.41***				
8. Neuroticism	– .16*	– .39***	– .20***			
9. Openness	.57***	.28***	.27***	– .23***		
1. Age	.01	– .02	– .01	– .10	.02	
11. Gender	– .12*	– .19***	– .08	– .21***	– .05	.25***

Note. Gender (1 = male, 0 = female); * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

Results of the multiple hierarchical analyses for job apathetic thought and job apathetic action are presented in Table 3. Age and gender accounted for 3% of the variance of apathetic thought, while standards and discrepancy accounted for an additional 14% of variance explained. When personality traits were added, they accounted for 30% of the variance of apathetic thought ($F(5,310) = 14.76$, $p < 0.001$), with gender and discrepancy significantly predicting lower apathetic thought, while age, extraversion, agreeableness, and openness predicted higher apathetic thought. Similar results were demonstrated by models predicting apathetic action. Age and gender accounted for 4% of the variance of apathetic action, while standards and discrepancy accounted for an additional 10% of variance explained. When personality traits were added, they accounted for 23% of the variance of apathetic action ($F(5, 310) = 10.19$, $p < 0.001$), with age, agreeableness, and openness statistically predicting higher apathetic action. Thus, $H2$ was fully supported, whereas $H1$, $H3$, and $H4$ were partly supported.

Table 3. Linear regression models predicting the apathetic thoughts and apathetic actions

Model	Variables	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	β	<i>p</i>	<i>F</i>	ΔR^2
<i>Risk factors of apathetic thoughts</i>							
I	Age	– .01	.01	– .13	.029	5.36	.027
	Gender	.30	.10	.17	.004		
II	Age	– .01	.01	– .14	.013	13.27	.133
	Gender	.35	.10	.19	.001		
	Standards	– .30	.07	– .27	< .001		
	Discrepancy	.37	.06	.36	< .001		
III	Age	– .01	.01	– .11	.032	14.76	.280
	Gender	.19	.10	.11	.047		
	Standards	– .12	.07	– .11	.064		
	Discrepancy	.17	.06	.17	.004		
	Extraversion	– .10	.04	– .13	.025		
	Agreeableness	– .27	.06	– .28	< .001		
	Conscientiousness	– .01	.05	– .01	.939		
	Neuroticism	.06	.05	.06	.305		
	Openness	– .12	.06	– .14	.028		
<i>Risk factors of apathetic actions</i>							
IV	Age	– .02	.01	– .20	< .001	6.27	.032
	Gender	.10	.10	.06	.280		
V	Age	– .02	.01	– .23	< .001	8.89	.090
	Gender	.14	.09	.08	.137		
	Standards	– .29	.06	– .28	< .001		
	Discrepancy	.19	.06	.20	.001		

VI	Age	– .02	.01	– .20	< .001	1.19	.206
	Gender	.02	.09	.01	.814		
	Standards	– .11	.07	– .11	.079		
	Discrepancy	.02	.06	.03	.689		
	Extraversion	– .01	.04	– .02	.775		
	Agreeableness	– .17	.06	– .19	.003		
	Conscientiousness	– .04	.05	– .04	.448		
	Neuroticism	.01	.04	.02	.799		
	Openness	– .22	.05	– .27	< .001		

Note. Significant predictors are marked in bold.

Discussion

The study investigated the associations between job apathy and personality variables such as the Five Factor Model and perfectionism. The key findings of the study were that job apathetic thoughts were positively associated with maladaptive perfectionism and negatively - with extraversion, agreeableness and openness. Job apathetic actions are negatively associated with agreeableness and openness.

Maladaptive perfectionism was associated with apathetic thoughts. In fact, discrepancy between the intended and real performance outcome might lead to the loss of interest in everyday actions which is the key symptom of apathy (Marin, 1991). A maladaptive perfectionist is a person with fierce striving for perfection, who is trying to reach perfection and is unable to stop even when tired or unsatisfied by their actions. It is not surprising that after grueling attempts to reach perfection a person could feel exhaustion and meaninglessness of one's actions. That is why perfectionism is seen in the workplace to a larger extent if a perfectionist employee is overcommitted to work (Philp et al., 2012).

As is known from previous research, extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness and openness are associated with positive health outcomes and psychological well-being, while neuroticism — with the negative ones (Lewis, Cardwell, 2020; Mitchell et al., 2021). The results of this study showed that extraversion, agreeableness and openness are negatively associated with job apathetic thoughts while agreeableness and openness are negatively associated with job apathetic actions. By contrast with earlier research, we found that conscientiousness and neuroticism are not associated with job apathy. The explanation of this fact might lie in cross-cultural differences. For example, one study demonstrated that apathy and personality traits have different associations in eastern and western cultures (Bjornsen et al., 2007).

This study has several limitations. Firstly, this study is based on the cross-sectional approach which does not allow us to estimate the causal relationship between perfectionism, personality traits and job apathy. Further studies could employ longitudinal or experimental research design. Secondly, the sample is limited in size and sampling methods as the study was carried out on a convenience sample with the limited number of respondents. In future researchers might enlarge the sample size and employ more representative sampling methods. Thirdly, self-reported measures were used in this study. Further studies should consider such job outcomes as the level of income, the number of working hours per week, career development.

There are several implications of this study. Firstly, negative relationship between perfectionism and job apathy could be reduced by ongoing workplace support in the form of coaching or mentoring programs or regular positive feedback. Secondly, career counselors could pay special attention to those employees who have a successful track record but lack the desire to move to higher organizational positions. Thirdly, perfectionism questionnaires could be applied in the employee selection process (Bußenius, Harendza, 2019).

Declarations

Consent to participate

Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

Data availability statement

All data generated or analyzed during this study are included in this article and its supplementary information files.

A funding statement

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A conflict-of-interest statement

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest

Author contributions

All authors contributed to the study. All authors read and approved of the final manuscript.

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Профессиональная апатия: роль черт личности и перфекционизма

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Аннотация. Апатия является серьёзной угрозой для субъективного благополучия сотрудников и успеха организаций, тем не менее данное явление практически не изучалось в организационном контексте (Schmidt et al., 2017). Понятие профессиональной апатии включает две составляющих: апатичные мысли и апатичные действия. Апатичные мысли предполагают отсутствие интереса к работе и удовлетворения от её выполнения. Апатичные действия означают отсутствие намерения выполнить работу хорошо. Сотрудники делают то, что должны, не прикладывая осознанных усилий к выполнению поставленных задач. *Цель.* Цель данного исследования — изучить перфекционизм и черты личности как предикторы профессиональной апатии. *Метод.* В данном исследовании приняли участие 320 сотрудников российских организаций (56.2% женщин), средний возраст 38.57 лет (стандартное отклонение = 9.80). Участники исследования заполняли русскоязычные версии «Шкалы профессиональной апатии» Г. Б. Шмидта, «Краткой шкалы перфекционизма» Р. Слейни, краткого портретного опросника «Большая пятёрка личностных черт» М. С. Егоровой и О. И. Паршиковой. *Результаты.* Серия линейных регрессионных анализов показала, что возраст, экстраверсия, доброжелательность и открытость опыту являлись негативными предикторами апатичных действий, в то время как пол и дезадаптивный перфекционизм были положительными предикторами апатичных мыслей.

Ключевые слова: профессиональная апатия; адаптивный перфекционизм; дезадаптивный перфекционизм; черты личности.