THE ROLE OF IMPROVISATION IN THE LINK BETWEEN PROACTIVE BEHAVIOR AND WORK PERFORMANCE: EVIDENCE FROM EASTERN CHINA

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Abstract

Purpose: This study investigates the mechanisms linking proactive behavior to employee work performance within the high-velocity context of HR consulting firms in Eastern China. Grounded in the Conservation of Resources (COR) theory, the research examines the mediating role of improvisation in translating anticipatory behaviors into professional success.

Study Design/Methodology/Approach: A quantitative research design was used with a self-administered questionnaire to collect data from 401 HR consulting professionals in Eastern China. Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) was used to test the measurement and structural models.

Findings: The results provide robust empirical support for the direct effect of proactive behavior on work performance ($\beta = 0.621$, $p < 0.001$). The study also identifies improvisation as a crucial mechanism. Proactive behavior significantly drives improvisation ($\beta = 0.840$, $p < 0.001$), which, in turn, enhances work performance ($\beta = 0.244$, $p < 0.001$). Mediation analysis confirms that improvisation partially mediates the relationship between proactive behavior and work performance. The model has high explanatory power, accounting for 74% of the variance in work performance.

Originality/Value: This research advances COR theory by conceptualizing improvisation not as a reactive emergency measure, but as a sophisticated capability ("resource caravan") developed through proactive investment. It challenges Western-centric models by showing that in Eastern China's volatile market, planning and improvisation are complementary, intertwined competencies rather than opposing forces.

Keywords: Proactive Behavior, Improvisation, Employee Work Performance, HR Consulting, Eastern China, PLS-SEM, Conservation of Resources Theory

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Introduction

The global Human Resources (HR) consulting industry has rapidly evolved from a provider of traditional administrative support into a strategic engine for organizational agility and transformation (Douglas & Haley, 2025; Tavoletti et al., 2021). Facing the dual pressures of digitalization and the global war for talent, the industry is shifting toward high-value advisory services, where static solutions are increasingly obsolete (Agustian et al., 2023). Modern consulting firms must now navigate complex organizational restructuring and culture management, requiring a workforce that is not only knowledgeable but exceptionally adaptive to client demands (Ayamga et al., 2024). This dynamic is intensified within China, particularly in the Eastern region (including Shanghai, Jiangsu, and Zhejiang), which serves as the nation's economic hub (Yin et al., 2025). The market landscape in Eastern China is characterized by high-velocity competition and a unique synthesis of Western management standards and local cultural nuances (Li et al., 2019). HR consulting firms in this region operate in a hyper-competitive environment where speed of delivery and customization are prerequisites for survival.

Despite the sector's growth, firms in this region face a critical operational challenge: maintaining consistent high-level performance amidst volatility. The "Standard Operating Procedure" approach is frequently rendered ineffective by the unpredictable nature of client needs in Eastern China. Consequently, firms are struggling to identify behavioral drivers that enable consultants to navigate ambiguity effectively, leading to a pressing need to understand how employees can maintain output in the face of unforeseen obstacles (Tendayi & Starr, 2025).

Employee Work Performance is positioned as the focal outcome variable of this study. In knowledge-intensive sectors like HR consulting, individual performance is not merely a metric of productivity but the primary determinant of client satisfaction, retention, and firm reputation (Maley et al., 2024). Understanding the antecedents of performance is, therefore, critical for sustaining competitive advantage in this service-oriented economy (Ratasuk, 2020). To explain performance variations, this study identifies Proactive Behavior as a key independent variable. Proactive employees anticipate future needs and self-initiate change (Satwika et al., 2025; Zhang et al., 2023).

Furthermore, the study introduces improvisation, the ability to spontaneously replan and act, as a critical factor. It is proposed that proactivity drives performance not in isolation, but specifically by enabling consultants to improvise solutions in real time (Abubakar et al., 2021). The study is grounded in the Conservation of Resources (COR) Theory. COR theory posits that individuals strive to acquire and protect resources. In this context, proactive behavior is viewed as an investment in resources that develops the capability to improvise (Demerouti, 2025). This accumulated resource pool subsequently leads to higher performance outcomes, preventing burnout and ensuring sustained productivity in high-pressure environments.

While the link between proactivity and performance is established, existing literature remains fragmented regarding the mechanisms that facilitate this relationship in non-Western, high-context

cultures (Aslam et al., 2020; Rudawska et al., 2025). Specifically, the mechanism of improvisation as a critical mediator remains underexplored in the context of the Chinese consulting industry, leaving a "black box" regarding how anticipatory behaviors translate into results during crises (Ibrahim et al., 2018). Theoretically, this research contributes to the organizational behavior literature by integrating improvisation into the proactivity-performance framework. It extends the COR theory by demonstrating how resource investment (proactivity) generates adaptive capabilities (improvisation) to foster superior outcomes in a transition economy context. Practically, the findings will provide HR consulting leaders with evidence-based strategies for recruitment and training. By understanding these dynamics, firms can foster organizational cultures that value adaptive spontaneity alongside planning, ensuring consultants are equipped to thrive in the complex business environment of Eastern China.

Objectives

This study aims to empirically examine the direct impact of proactive behavior on work performance and to rigorously test the mediating role of improvisation. The objective is to determine whether improvisation serves as a critical resource pathway linking proactivity to professional success. To address these objectives, this study poses the following research questions: RQ1: Does proactive behavior directly enhance employee work performance? RQ2: Does improvisation mediate the relationship between proactive behavior and work performance?

Literature Review

Theoretical Framework: Conservation of Resources (COR) Theory

To understand the dynamic relationship between proactive behavior, improvisation, and work performance, this study adopts the Conservation of Resources (COR) theory (Hobfoll, 1989) as its overarching theoretical lens. COR theory is a dominant framework in organizational behavior research, positing that individuals are motivated to protect their current resources and acquire new ones (Hobfoll, 2001). Resources are broadly defined as objects, personal characteristics, conditions, or energies valued by the individual.

The fundamental principle of COR theory relevant to this study is the concept of "resource investment" and "resource caravans". The theory suggests that individuals must invest resources to protect against resource loss, recover from losses, and gain new resources (Hobfoll, 2011). Specifically, resources do not exist in isolation but travel in packs or "caravans"; the possession of one personal resource (e.g., proactivity) facilitates the accumulation of other capability resources. In the high-velocity environment of HR consulting in Eastern China, employees engage in spirals of resource investment. Proactive behavior is viewed not merely as a personality trait but as an active investment of energy and cognitive resources aimed at anticipating future demands. COR theory logically explains that this investment is made to secure future performance outcomes (a valued resource) and to build distinct capabilities, such as improvisation, which act as a reservoir of adaptive responses (Egozi Farkash et al., 2022).

Proactive Behavior: The Initiating Driver

Proactive behavior has evolved from early conceptions of "taking initiative" to a well-defined construct in contemporary literature. Parker et al. (2006) seminally defined proactive behavior as self-initiated, anticipatory action aimed at changing and improving the situation or oneself. Unlike passive adaptation, proactivity involves acting in advance of a future situation rather than merely reacting (Crant & Chen, 2024).

In knowledge-intensive industries, proactive behavior is widely recognized as a critical determinant of organizational success (Yalçınyiğit & Karaçay, 2025). Research has consistently demonstrated a positive relationship between proactivity and individual job performance (Li et al., 2025; Zhang et al., 2022). Proactive employees actively seek feedback, identify problems before they escalate, and champion new ideas (Verhoeven & Madsen, 2022). From a COR perspective, these individuals are "resource-rich"; they invest their cognitive resources to alter their work environment, thereby reducing uncertainty and creating conditions favorable for high performance. Thus, we propose:

H1: Proactive behavior is positively related to employee work performance.

Improvisation: The Adaptive Mechanism

While proactivity focuses on anticipation, improvisation focuses on handling the unexpected in the moment. Originating from jazz and theatre metaphors, improvisation in organizational theory is defined by Moorman and Miner (1998) as the "convergence of composition and execution", meaning the time gap between planning and acting is narrowing to near zero.

Historically viewed as a remedy for failure or a lack of planning, modern literature reframes improvisation as a sophisticated skill that involves creativity under pressure (Balzano & Marzi, 2023; Ravasio, 2024). In the consulting sector, where clients' needs shift rapidly, improvisation is a vital competency. It enables employees to respond effectively to unforeseen challenges. Empirical studies suggest that effective improvisation leads to better service recovery and innovative problem-solving (Prayag et al., 2023; Stangl et al., 2024).

The Mediating Role of Improvisation

By connecting these variables, we argue that proactive behavior fosters improvisation as part of the resource-generation process. Proactive individuals, by virtue of their anticipatory scanning, accumulate diverse knowledge and situational awareness, resources that are prerequisites for effective improvisation (Mannucci et al., 2020). When a proactive consultant encounters a surprise, their prior investment in understanding the environment allows them to "compose and execute" a solution simultaneously and effectively (Elsawah et al., 2024; Sun et al., 2023).

This aligns with the COR "resource caravan" logic: the investment in proactivity builds a caravan of adaptive capabilities (improvisation). Improvisation, in turn, directly enhances performance by solving immediate client problems that standard procedures cannot address (Açıkgöz & Latham, 2022; Jun et al., 2021). Thus, improvisation serves as a resource pathway through which proactivity translates into tangible results.

H2: Proactive behavior is positively related to improvisation.

H3: Improvisation is positively related to employee work performance.

H4: Improvisation mediates the relationship between proactive behavior and employee work performance.

Table 1 Summary of Research Hypotheses and Theoretical Justification

Hypothesis	Statement	Theoretical Basis (COR Theory)
H1	Proactive behavior is positively related to employee work performance.	Resource Investment Principle: Individuals invest current resources (energy, foresight) to gain future resources (performance success and career stability).
H2	Proactive behavior is positively related to improvisation.	Resource Caravan: Proactive investment does not happen in isolation; it accumulates a "caravan" of complementary capabilities, specifically the knowledge and agility required to improvise.
H3	Improvisation is positively related to employee work performance.	Resource Deployment: Improvisation is a distinct capability that enables employees to handle unexpected demands, protecting them from failure and ensuring high output.
H4	Improvisation mediates the relationship between proactive behavior and employee work performance.	Resource Pathway: Improvisation serves as the specific transmission mechanism through which the intent of proactivity is translated into performance outcomes in a volatile environment.

Control Variables

To isolate the effects of the core variables, this study includes standard demographic controls: gender, age, education, and work experience. Prior research indicates that demographic characteristics, such as gender and age, can influence both access to resources and performance evaluations (Kim et al., 2012; Ratasuk & Charoensukmongkol, 2019). Educational background is often a proxy for human capital (knowledge and skills), which is a primary resource in the COR framework and a known predictor of task performance (Kiazad et al., 2024). Work Experience or tenure provides employees with tacit knowledge and organizational memory, resources that facilitate both proactivity and effective improvisation (Lee & Kim, 2023). Controlling for these ensures that the observed effects are attributed to resource-based behavioral dynamics rather than structural advantages.

Methodology

This study employs a quantitative research design and a cross-sectional survey to empirically test the proposed hypotheses and the conceptual framework presented in Figure 1. The analytical approach utilizes Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM). PLS-SEM was selected over Covariance-Based SEM (CB-SEM) for several strategic reasons aligned with the study's objectives (Ratasuk & Naing, 2025). First, the primary goal of this research is prediction and theory development,

specifically, explaining the variance (R^2) in employee work performance, rather than theory confirmation, for which PLS-SEM is superior (Hair Jr et al., 2020; Zhang et al., 2025). Second, PLS-SEM is particularly robust for analyzing complex models that focus on mediating effects, without the restrictive distributional assumptions, such as multivariate normality, required by CB-SEM (Niu et al., 2025; Ton et al., 2025).

Population and Sampling

The target population for this study comprises employees of HR consulting firms in Eastern China. Given the fragmented nature of the consulting industry and the lack of a centralized registry of all practitioners in this region, the exact population size is unknown. Consequently, a purposive sampling technique was employed. This non-probability sampling method ensures that respondents possess the specific knowledge and experience relevant to the study's context, for example, they are active consultants rather than administrative support staff (Ratasuk et al., 2025).

To ensure statistical power and the stability of the PLS-SEM results, a target sample size of $N \geq 400$ was established (Cochran & Chambers, 1965; Naing & Ratasuk, 2025). This exceeds the minimum sample size requirements suggested by the "10-times rule" (Hair et al., 2011) and provides sufficient power (0.80) to detect small to medium effect sizes at the 0.05 significance level.

The final sample, shown in Table 2, consisted of 401 valid responses from HR consulting professionals in Eastern China, reflecting a diverse yet representative cross-section of the industry. The gender distribution was nearly balanced, with 50.37% male (n = 202) and 49.63% female (n = 199) respondents. In terms of age, the workforce was predominantly young, with the majority (64.34%) in the 25-34 age bracket, followed by the 35-44 group (16.21%), while those over 55 accounted for less than 1% of the sample. The respondents were highly educated, with 63.09% holding a Bachelor's degree and 18.45% possessing a Master's degree. Regarding professional tenure, the largest segment had 1-3 years of experience (34.17%), followed by those with less than one year (26.93%) and 4-6 years (23.44%). Organizationally, the sample was primarily composed of operational-level staff (37.16%) and early management personnel (32.67%), with middle and top management combined accounting for approximately 30% of the participants.

Table 2 Respondents' Characteristics

Characteristics	Categories	Descriptive Statistics	
		Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	202	50.37
	Female	199	49.63
Age	18-21	14	3.49
	22-24	27	6.73
	25-34	258	64.34
	35-44	65	16.21
	45-54	35	8.73
	55-60	2	0.50
	Over 60	0	0
Education	Associate's degree or lower	67	16.71
	Bachelor's degree	253	63.09
	Master's degree	74	18.45
	Doctorate or higher	7	1.75
Years of Experience in HR Consulting	Less than 1 year	108	26.93
	1-3 years	137	34.17
	4-6 years	94	23.44
	7-9 years	26	6.48
	10 years or more	36	8.98
Current Role/Position in the HR Consulting Firm	Operational level	149	37.17
	Early management	131	32.67
	Middle management	76	18.95
	Top management	45	11.22

Data Collection

Data were collected using an online, self-administered questionnaire distributed via professional networks and industry-specific digital platforms widely used in China, such as LinkedIn and WeChat. The online format was chosen to maximize reach across the geographically dispersed Eastern China region and to facilitate respondent anonymity. To ensure data quality, the survey included screening questions at the outset. Potential respondents were asked to confirm their current employment in an HR consulting firm and their location within Eastern China; those who did not meet these criteria were automatically disqualified from the study.

Questionnaire Design

The questionnaire was structured into four distinct sections to streamline the response process and minimize respondent fatigue: Screening Section: Verification of industry and regional eligibility. Demographics: Collection of control variables including gender, age, education level, and work experience. Behavioral Assessment: Measurement of the independent variable (Proactive Behavior) and the mediator (Improvisation). Outcome Assessment: Measurement of the dependent variable (Employee Work Performance). All core constructs were measured using validated multi-item scales adapted from existing literature, proactive personality from Aboramadan and Karatepe (2021), improvisation from Al Issa (2021), and work performance from Ratasuk (2022), to fit the context of HR consulting. Responses were recorded on a standard 5-point Likert scale (ranging from 1 = "Strongly Disagree" to 5 = "Strongly Agree") to capture the intensity of respondents' agreement.

Data Analysis

The collected data were analyzed using WarpPLS software. The analysis followed a two-stage process: Assessment of the Measurement Model: Construct reliability and validity were evaluated first. Reliability was assessed using Composite Reliability (CR) and Cronbach's alpha, with thresholds set at > 0.70 (Ngo et al., 2025). Convergent validity was established by ensuring the Average Variance Extracted (AVE) for each construct exceeded 0.50 (Cheung et al., 2024). Discriminant validity was rigorously tested using the Heterotrait-Monotrait ratio of correlations (HTMT), requiring values below 0.85 (or 0.90) to ensure constructs were empirically distinct (Pan & Ratasuk, 2025).

Assessment of the Structural Model: The structural relationships were tested using PLS-SEM for direct effects, and a bootstrapping procedure with 5,000 subsamples was used for robust mediation analysis. Key metrics evaluated included the coefficient of determination (R^2) to assess predictive accuracy, path coefficients (β) for the strength and direction of relationships, and Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) values (< 5) to check for collinearity issues (Ab Hamid et al., 2017). Mediation was tested by analyzing specific indirect effects and confidence intervals. Additionally, Common Method Bias (CMB) was rigorously assessed by examining the correlation matrix and VIF values to ensure that the model's variance was attributable to the constructs rather than the measurement method (Kock, 2017).

Ethical Considerations

Ethical standards were strictly adhered to throughout the research process. Participation was entirely voluntary, and respondents were informed of their right to withdraw at any time without penalty. Informed consent was obtained digitally prior to the start of the survey. The study ensured the anonymity and confidentiality of all participants; no Personally Identifiable Information (PII) was collected, and data were reported only in aggregate to protect individuals' privacy and their employing firms' privacy.

Results

The assessment of the measurement model focused on determining the reliability and validity of the constructs. As presented in Table 3, the Factor Loadings (FL) for all items exceeded the recommended threshold of 0.70, indicating strong indicator reliability. Internal consistency was confirmed, with both Cronbach's Alpha (CA) and Composite Reliability (CR) values surpassing the 0.70 benchmark for all constructs. Convergent validity was established as the Average Variance Extracted (AVE) values were well above the 0.50 threshold. Furthermore, collinearity concerns were addressed, with Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) values remaining below the critical limit of 5.

Table 3 Convergent Validity, Reliability, Multicollinearity and Common Method Bias (CMB)

Construct	Question Items	FL	CR	CA	AVE	VIF
Work Performance	WP1: I consistently meet and exceed the objectives set for my projects.	0.867	0.957	0.946	0.787	3.772
	WP2: I effectively fulfill the core responsibilities and deliverables of my HR consulting role.	0.892				
	WP3: I proactively address client needs and provide high-quality solutions.	0.917				
	WP4: I adapt my approach to successfully navigate unforeseen challenges in consulting engagements.	0.902				
	WP5: My contributions directly enhance the firm's reputation and client satisfaction.	0.886				
	WP6: I rarely miss important deadlines or overlook critical aspects of my consulting work.	0.857				
Proactive Behavior	PP1: I am constantly on the lookout for new ways to improve my life.	0.844	0.963	0.958	0.724	4.781
	PP2: Wherever I have been, I have been a powerful force for constructive change.	0.868				
	PP3: Nothing is more exciting than seeing my ideas turn into reality.	0.841				
	PP4: If I see something I don't like, I fix it.	0.808				
	PP5: No matter what the odds, if I believe in something, I will make it happen.	0.870				
	PP6: I love being a champion for my ideas, even against others' opposition	0.832				
	PP7: I excel at identifying opportunities.	0.848				
	PP8: I am always looking for better ways to do things.	0.871				
	PP9: If I believe in an idea, no obstacle will prevent me from making it happen.	0.879				
	PP10: I can spot a good opportunity long before others can.	0.847				

Table 3 Convergent Validity, Reliability, Multicollinearity and Common Method Bias (CMB) (Cont.)

Construct	Question Items	FL	CR	CA	AVE	VIF
Improvision	I1: I effectively deal with unanticipated events on the spot in my work.	0.901	0.961	0.952	0.806	3.836
	I2: I can think on my feet when carrying out my actions.	0.900				
	I3: I quickly respond to unexpected problems that arise in the moment.	0.891				
	I4: I try new and adaptive approaches when facing problems.	0.902				
	I5: I actively identify opportunities for new or improved work processes in my job.	0.906				
	I6: I am willing to take risks to generate new ideas in my job.	0.886				

In addition to convergent validity, discriminant validity was assessed to ensure that each construct is empirically distinct. The Heterotrait-Monotrait ratio of correlations (HTMT) was utilized for this purpose. As shown in Table 4, all HTMT values were below the conservative threshold of 0.90 (Henseler et al., 2015), confirming that the constructs differ sufficiently from one another.

Table 4 Discriminant Validity (HTMT Ratio)

Construct	Perform	Proactiv	Improvis
Perform			
Proactiv	0.879***		
Improvis	0.822***	0.879***	

Remarks: *** $p < 0.001$, Perform = Work performance, Proactiv = Proactive behavior, Improvis = Improvision

Before assessing the structural relationships, the overall quality and fit of the model were evaluated using standard global fit indices relevant to PLS-SEM (Kock, 2015). The model exhibited robust fit metrics. The Average Path Coefficient (APC), Average R-squared (ARS), and Average Adjusted R-squared (AARS) were all statistically significant ($p < 0.05$), indicating that the model explains a meaningful amount of variance and that the path relationships are robust. Furthermore, the Average Block VIF (AVIF) and Average Full Collinearity VIF (AFVIF) were tested to assess vertical and lateral collinearity. Both values were well below the recommended threshold of 3.3 (or 5.0), suggesting that Common Method Bias and multicollinearity were not serious concerns in this study. The Tenenhaus Goodness-of-Fit (GoF) index was also calculated to assess the model's explanatory power, exceeding the cutoff for a "large" effect size (GoF ≥ 0.36). Finally, the Simpson's Paradox Ratio (SPR), R-squared Contribution Ratio (RSCR), and Statistical Suppression Ratio (SSR) all met the required thresholds (typically ≥ 0.7), confirming that the model is free from instances of Simpson's paradox and that the predictor variables make valid contributions to the variance explained.

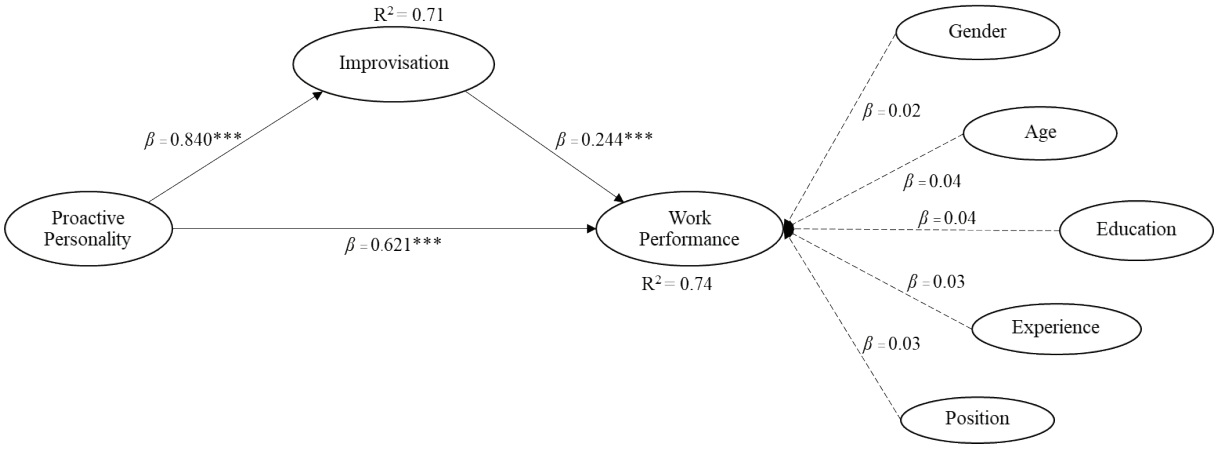


Figure 1 WarpPLS Results

The analysis revealed a significant positive relationship between Proactive Behavior and Work Performance ($\beta = 0.621$, $p < 0.001$), providing strong support for H1. Additionally, Proactive Behavior was found to have a substantial positive impact on improvisation ($\beta = 0.840$, $p < 0.001$), supporting H2. Furthermore, improvisation positively influenced Work Performance ($\beta = 0.244$, $p < 0.001$), thereby supporting H3.

Crucially, the predictive power of the structural model was assessed using the coefficient of determination (R^2). The model demonstrated high explanatory power, with Proactive Behavior accounting for 71% of the variance in Improvisation ($R^2 = 0.71$) and the combined model accounting for 74% of the variance in Work Performance ($R^2 = 0.74$).

To test H4, the mediating role of improvisation was analyzed using bootstrapping with 5,000 subsamples. Given the significant paths from Proactive Behavior to Improvisation and from Improvisation to Work Performance, the indirect effects are significant ($\beta = 0.205$, $p < 0.001$, SE = 0.034). The robustness of this mediation is further supported by the 95% confidence interval, which does not include zero (95% CI [0.138, 0.272]), and a meaningful effect size (ES = 0.173). Since the direct effect of Proactive Behavior on Performance remains significant, this indicates that improvisation acts as a partial mediator, supporting H4.

Furthermore, the analysis revealed that none of the control variables, Gender, Age, Education, Experience, or Position, had a statistically significant effect on performance.

Discussion

This study aimed to unravel the mechanisms linking proactive behavior to employee work performance within the dynamic context of HR consulting firms in Eastern China. Grounded in the Conservation of Resources (COR) theory, the research examined the direct impact of proactivity and the mediating role of improvisation. The findings offer a nuanced understanding of how consultants navigate uncertainty to achieve superior results.

The statistical analysis revealed a robust positive relationship between proactive behavior and work performance ($\beta = 0.621$, $p < 0.001$), supporting H1. This finding aligns with the core tenets of COR theory, which posits that individuals who actively invest resources, such as energy and foresight, are likely to accrue further resources in the form of performance success (Hobfoll, 2011). It also corroborates prior empirical works (Li et al., 2025; Zhang et al., 2022). For example, Verhoeven and Madsen (2022) identified proactivity as a critical antecedent of job performance. In the HR consulting industry in Eastern China, employees who exhibit high levels of proactive behavior tend to achieve significantly higher work performance. This may be because the consulting market in this region is characterized by high velocity and client ambiguity, where passive adherence to standard operating procedures is insufficient. Success in this environment requires the "resource investment" of anticipating client needs before they are explicitly stated, allowing proactive consultants to minimize potential stressors and align their output more closely with evolving client demands.

The study further provides strong empirical support for the mediating role of improvisation. Proactive behavior was found to be a powerful predictor of improvisation ($\beta = 0.840$, $p < 0.001$), aligning with prior research (Elsawah et al., 2024; Sun et al., 2023), which in turn significantly enhanced performance ($\beta = 0.244$, $p < 0.001$), consistent with previous studies (Açıkgöz & Latham, 2022; Jun et al., 2021), confirming H2, H3, and H4. This extends existing literature by framing improvisation not merely as a reactive measure, but as a capability fueled by proactivity. In knowledge-intensive firms, proactive employees tend to demonstrate superior improvisational capacity, which subsequently drives their performance. This may be because proactive individuals, through their anticipatory scanning and information seeking, accumulate a rich "resource caravan" of situational knowledge. When unexpected challenges arise, a common occurrence in Chinese business consulting, these accumulated resources allow them to "compose and execute" solutions simultaneously. Thus, improvisation serves as the mechanism through which the benefits of proactivity are realized in real time.

Furthermore, the results shed light on the high correlation observed between proactive behavior and improvisation. While theoretically distinct, one focusing on anticipation and the other on real-time adaptation, our findings suggest that in the hyper-competitive context of Eastern China, these constructs empirically converge. This indicates that effective improvisation is not chaotic "making it up as you go", but rather "disciplined spontaneity" rooted in proactive preparation. The proactive consultant constantly gathers information, creating a reservoir of knowledge that enables rapid, improvisational responses. Consequently, the ability to improvise is inextricably linked to the investment in proactivity.

Theoretical Contributions

This study significantly advances COR theory by integrating improvisation as a key mechanism in the resource "resource caravan" spiral. While COR has traditionally focused on stress and burnout prevention, this research demonstrates its utility in explaining positive performance dynamics via resource accumulation. It conceptualizes improvisation not as a chaotic response to resource loss, but as a sophisticated capability resource enabled by proactive investment. The research resolves theoretical

ambiguity regarding the relationship between planning (proactivity) and spontaneity (improvisation). By establishing improvisation as a mediator, the findings challenge the view that these are opposing forces. Instead, the study provides evidence for complementarity, in which proactivity prepares the way for effective improvisation. Finally, the study enriches the contextual literature on HR consulting in transition economies. By focusing on Eastern China, it challenges Western-centric models that often assume stable operating environments, highlighting that in volatile markets, adaptive capabilities are central pathways to success.

Practical Implications

For HR consulting firms, the findings suggest a shift in recruitment strategy. Firms should prioritize candidates who demonstrate a "proactive-adaptive" profile. Interview processes should assess not just the ability to plan, but the ability to "think on one's feet", as these traits are empirically linked to high performance. Training programs should move beyond static Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs). Instead, firms should cultivate "resource caravans" by training consultants in scenario planning and rapid prototyping. Encouraging a culture that rewards "smart improvisation" will allow the benefits of proactivity to materialize fully. Since improvisation mediates performance, performance appraisals should be adjusted to recognize adaptive problem-solving. Managers should acknowledge that in a volatile market, the path to a goal may change; therefore, employees who successfully improvise to meet client needs should be rewarded as highly as those who follow a pre-set plan.

Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research

The primary limitation of this study is its cross-sectional design, which, while robust for structural analysis, restricts the ability to make strict causal inferences. Future research should employ longitudinal designs to track how the "resource investment" of proactivity evolves into improvisation capabilities over time. Secondly, the reliance on self-reported measures for work performance carries the risk of social desirability bias. Although statistical checks (CMB) suggested this was not a significant issue, future studies would benefit from incorporating supervisor ratings or objective performance metrics, such as billable hours or client retention rates, to triangulate findings. Finally, the geographic scope was limited to Eastern China. While this provided a specific high-velocity context, it limits generalizability to other regions with different economic speeds or cultural norms. Future research should conduct comparative studies between Eastern China and more stable Western markets to test if the strength of the mediation path varies globally.

Conclusions

In conclusion, this study elucidates the vital roles of proactive behavior and improvisation in driving employee work performance within Eastern China's HR consulting sector. The results confirm that proactivity is a potent driver of performance, acting primarily by fostering improvisation capabilities. Rather than acting as a boundary condition, improvisation serves as a critical transmission mechanism. Ultimately, this research suggests that in the turbulent landscape of modern consulting, the most successful

employees are those who actively prepare for the future while remaining agile enough to reshape their actions in the present.

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