

## DO CHAMELEONS GET AHEAD? THE EFFECTS OF SELF-MONITORING ON MANAGERIAL CAREERS

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**This study tracked 139 graduates of the same master's of business administration program for five years and demonstrated significant main effects of the personality variable self-monitoring on career mobility. The chameleon-like high self-monitors were more likely than the true-to-themselves low self-monitors to change employers, move locations, and achieve cross-company promotions. Of the 72 individuals who did not change employers, those high on self-monitoring obtained more internal promotions than those low on the variable.**

The question of who gets ahead and why is of interest to most people who work in organizations. Promotions and other employment changes can drastically alter the lives of both those who move and those who stay. Employment changes can lead not only to different job duties and rewards, but also to differences in where people live and whom they interact with. Such changes can, indeed, transform people's lives.

The research literature has tended to explain career mobility in terms of either individual differences in education and training (e.g., Becker, 1975) or the effects of employment discrimination on categories of people (e.g., Stroh, Brett, & Reilly, 1992). There is also a large sociological literature that examines industry, occupation, and firm effects on career opportunities (see Baron [1984] for a review). The possibility that personality might have a main effect on career outcomes has been neglected despite a resurgence of interest in dispositional approaches to organizational behavior. Researchers taking a dispositional approach have emphasized the influence of affective disposition on job attitudes (e.g., Staw, Bell, & Clausen, 1986) but have, so far, overlooked behavioral outcomes such as job mobility and promotion.

Nevertheless, research does point to the possibility that personality may affect career outcomes. For example, personality has been shown to significantly affect the performance of top managers, such as U.S. presidents (House, Spangler, & Woycke, 1991), as well as the performance of occupants of boundary-spanning positions (Caldwell & O'Reilly, 1982a). Building on this work, in the present study we looked at whether personality influences

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the early career outcomes of master's of business administration (M.B.A.) graduates across a wide variety of organizations.

Early promotion is of critical importance in shaping corporate careers. In his seminal work on career paths in an organization, Rosenbaum strongly emphasized this point: "Mobility in the earliest stage of one's career bears an unequivocal relationship with one's later career, predicting many of the most important parameters of later moves: career 'ceiling,' career 'floor,' as well as the probabilities of promotion and demotion in each successive period" (1979: 220). Rosenbaum's data showed dramatic differences over 13 years between those promoted and not promoted in the first few years of their careers, but he offered no suggestions concerning personality variables that might have affected the struggle to get ahead for the individuals he studied.

According to a survey of chief executive officers, promotions in corporations are based on social presentability, visibility, organizational demeanor, and political skill, as well as on competent job performance (Heisler & Gemmill, 1978). However, the perception of job performance itself is influenced by such apparently extraneous issues as impressions of whether individuals have prominent friends at work, and such influence occurs whether or not the individuals concerned have supervisory responsibilities (Kilduff & Krackhardt, 1994). The evidence suggests that the skilful management of impressions can enhance an individual's chances of career success in organizations.

The self-monitoring personality variable (Snyder, 1974) provides important insights into the dynamics of impression management in organizations (Snyder & Copeland, 1989: 7). Self-monitoring theory distinguishes between high self-monitors, who are especially attuned to role expectations, and low self-monitors, who insist on being themselves despite social expectations. High self-monitors, identified by their high scores on the Self-Monitoring Scale (Snyder & Gangestad, 1986), are "markedly sensitive and responsive to social and interpersonal cues to situational appropriateness" whereas low self-monitors are "less responsive to situational and interpersonal specifications of appropriate behavior" (Snyder & Gangestad, 1982: 123). High self-monitors use cues from others as guidelines for monitoring—that is, regulating and controlling—their verbal and nonverbal self-presentation (Snyder, 1979: 89). Low self-monitors, on the other hand, "are controlled from within by their affective states and attitudes" (Snyder, 1979: 89). In a social situation, high self-monitors ask the following: "Who does this situation want me to be and how can I be that person?" (Snyder, 1979). By contrast, low self-monitors ask this: "Who am I and how can I be me in this situation?" (Snyder, 1979).

Previous research comparing high and low self-monitors has investigated several behaviors relevant to the career success of those seeking to get ahead in corporate settings. High self-monitors perform better than lows in boundary-spanning jobs that require incumbents to be sensitive to a variety of social cues (Caldwell & O'Reilly, 1982a). Further, high self-monitors tend to emerge as the leaders of work groups (Zaccaro, Foti, & Kenny, 1991) and

are more likely than low self-monitors to resolve conflicts through collaboration and compromise (Baron, 1989). In addition, high self-monitors, faced with the failure of a project for which they have personal responsibility, are better than low self-monitors at rationalizing their actions and managing the information others receive about the situation (Caldwell & O'Reilly, 1982b). Finally, as Snyder and Copeland pointed out, high self-monitors "may be particularly willing and able to tailor and fashion an image to match the position into which they hope to be promoted" (1989: 16).

Self-monitoring, then, may be related to such important skills as boundary spanning, leadership, conflict management, information management, and impression management.

*Hypothesis 1: Compared to low self-monitors, high self-monitors will be more likely to achieve promotions in managerial careers.*

The second and third hypotheses are concerned with how commitment to work relations affects career mobility. High self-monitors have been characterized as pragmatic and utilitarian in their approach to relationships, whereas low self-monitors have been described as committed and principled. High self-monitors strive to maintain flexibility and make little emotional investment in relationships. Low self-monitors, by contrast, tend to invest emotionally in particular relationships so that they can be themselves—that is, display their attitudes, traits, and dispositions (Snyder, 1987: 68–69).

Research has shown that high self-monitors are less committed to their current friends (Snyder, Gangestad, & Simpson, 1983), dating partners (Snyder & Simpson, 1984), and sexual partners (Snyder, Simpson, & Gangestad, 1986) than are low self-monitors. This difference in orientation toward relationships may also affect employment mobility. High self-monitors are likely to be less attached than low self-monitors to the network of friends and colleagues at their current places of employment and to be more flexible about the possibility of forming new relationships elsewhere. Although surprisingly little attention has been paid to the effects of self-monitoring on organizational transitions (Snyder & Copeland, 1989), recent research (Jenkins, 1993) has shown that high self-monitors are more likely than low self-monitors to express intentions to leave a current job. Therefore, we suggest that higher mobility with respect to both employers and geographical location will characterize the careers of high self-monitors. They are likely to feel relatively unconstrained about pursuing opportunity wherever it may be found, whereas low self-monitors are likely to be more committed to current workplace relationships.

*Hypothesis 2: Compared to low self-monitors, high self-monitors will be more likely to change employers.*

*Hypothesis 3: Compared to low self-monitors, high self-monitors will be more likely to undertake major geographical moves linked to employment.*

## METHODS

### Respondents

The research population consisted of one year's graduating class of 209 people from a nationally ranked M.B.A. program. We assumed that these graduates were placed in career tracks that would lead to managerial positions, even though their initial positions may not all have been managerial. These graduates averaged 16 on-campus interviews with major corporations, resulting in a mean of three job offers each. Their mean starting salary in 1987 dollars was \$43,698 (range, \$27,500 to \$65,000). Of the 209 graduates, 181 (87 percent) completed mailed copies of the Self-Monitoring Scale prior to graduation. We sought additional information from the M.B.A. program's alumni office concerning the respondents' initial job placements and their job changes during the first five years after their graduation. Questionnaire and placement data were available over time for 139 people, 67 percent of the original group of 209. Of these 139 people, 102, or 73 percent, were men. The average age at graduation was 27 years (s.d. = 3.23). Those who did not respond to alumni office requests for job information did not differ significantly from respondents with respect to gender, age, or self-monitoring score. The respondents therefore appeared to be representative of the larger population.

### Measures

**Self-monitoring.** Self-monitoring was measured during the respondents' second year in the M.B.A. program with the revised 18-item true-false version of the Self-Monitoring Scale (Snyder & Gangestad, 1986). The self-monitoring score can be understood as indicating the probability that an individual belongs to either the high- or the low-self-monitoring category (Gangestad & Snyder, 1985). The revised scale is both more reliable and more factorially pure than the original 25-item measure, described in Snyder (1974), with which it correlates at a .93 level (Snyder & Gangestad, 1986). In the present research, the scale's reliability as measured by Cronbach's (1951) alpha was .75 ( $\bar{x}$  = 9.93, s.d. = 3.65).

The validity of the original measure has been actively discussed (see Kilduff [1992] and Snyder and Gangestad [1986] for reviews). The most persuasive evidence for its predictive and construct validity consists of the extensive research over a 20-year period showing numerous behavioral and attitudinal differences between high and low self-monitors consistent with self-monitoring theory and detected by means of the Self-Monitoring Scale; Snyder (1987) reviews that research. With respect to discriminant validity, research has shown that the Self-Monitoring Scale reliably predicts a range of criterion behaviors that seemingly similar scales do not predict and that self-monitoring responses are not significantly correlated with responses to these other scales, such as need for approval, extraversion, locus of control, and field dependence (Snyder, 1979).

**Promotion.** For each respondent, we assessed two measures of promotion: (1) number of promotions achieved within a single company and (2)

number of promotions achieved in moves from one company to another. The information was made available by the alumni office and included, for each job change, the job title and the company name and address. We considered it unlikely that the self-reported job titles were inflated because they were announced in publications mailed to thousands of alumni and were thus subject to verification by colleagues and classmates. Three coders, a faculty member in management, a graduate research assistant, and the director of career placement for an M.B.A. program at a major eastern university, independently assessed whether each job change represented a promotion within or across companies. Assessments of promotions were based on changes in job titles. For example, one person, coded as achieving a within-company promotion, moved from a position as a financial consultant with Digital Equipment Corporation to become general accounting manager with the same company. A cross-company promotion is illustrated by another person's move from a position as a staff accountant with Price Waterhouse to a job as a senior tax executive with another major accounting firm. For within-company promotions, we estimated an intraclass measure of interrater reliability (Shrout & Fleiss, 1979: Case 2) of .93 for a mean of three random judges. For cross-company promotions, the intraclass correlation was .84. Discrepancies between the coders were resolved by means of a computer procedure that examined the votes of the three judges and required at least two votes before a job change was counted as a promotion.

**Job mobility.** This variable was a count of the number of times each employee changed employers.

**Geographic mobility.** Movements across state or country boundaries were considered major geographical moves. Unlike the person who simply moves across town, the person who moves across the boundary of a state or country is required to adapt to a host of new regulations. These regulations can affect such important activities as finding insurance, obtaining a driver's license, and paying taxes. For each employee, we measured geographic mobility as the sum of (1) the number of changes of place of employment from one U.S. state to another and (2) the number of changes of place of employment from one country to another.

**Control variables.** Because the data concerned a cohort that graduated in the same year with the same educational training from the same prestigious M.B.A. program, we expected demographic and job choice influences on mobility outcomes to be minimal. Nevertheless we considered gender effects in all analyses, given that gender has been shown to influence career outcomes (e.g., Stroh et al., 1992).<sup>1</sup> We also considered the possibility that the initial jobs the graduates chose might have affected career outcomes.

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<sup>1</sup> The respondent group was relatively homogenous with respect to age ( $\bar{x} = 27$ , s.d. = 3.23). Nevertheless, in all analyses we controlled for age, gender, and job type. The age covariate did not affect the pattern of results, and all age effects were nonsignificant, with chi-squares less than 1.0. Because of missing age data, the inclusion of age in the analyses reduced sample size. We report tests on the full data excluding age.

Two professors of management independently classified each initial job as primarily supervisory or as belonging to one of two other categories that emerged from a study of initial job placements: analyst and consulting-trading. Supervisory jobs were identified by the presence of such words as supervisor, manager, and director. Because coding was based on assignment to nominal categories, we assessed interrater reliability using coefficient kappa, which estimates interrater agreement correcting for chance agreement (Brennan & Prediger, 1981; Jones, Johnson, Butler, & Main, 1983); a value of .82 was obtained. Initial jobs were approximately evenly distributed across the three categories.

## ANALYSES AND RESULTS

Because relatively few respondents had had more than one promotion (<5%), more than one job change (<6%), or more than one geographical change (<1%), we dichotomized all the dependent variables into the categories of "none" and "at least one." Given these binary transformed dependent variables, use of logistic regression analysis was appropriate (Cox & Snell, 1989).

Preliminary analyses showed that individuals choosing initial jobs coded as supervisory did not differ from their peers with respect to self-monitoring ( $F = 1.52$ , n.s.), age ( $F < 1$ , n.s.), or gender ( $\chi^2 = 0.56$ , n.s.). Further, individuals' initial job choices were unrelated to career mobility, as shown by the nonsignificance of all chi-squares.<sup>2</sup> Table 1 shows that a dichotomized variable representing initial job type (supervisory/nonsupervisory) was uncorrelated with any of the other variables in the study. As expected, therefore, given the homogeneity of the group with respect to educational training and the consequent restriction of range concerning potential vocational choices, the initial types of jobs that people chose did not affect career outcomes. In fact, both the gender and job type control variables were nonsignificant in all the analyses reported below, and we eliminated them during the forward selection regression procedure that retained only variables significant at a .10 level. The results for the self-monitoring independent variable were not affected by the inclusion or exclusion of the nonsignificant control variables, but the exclusion of these variables did improve the overall fit of the regression models.<sup>3</sup>

The three hypotheses predicted that high self-monitors would be more likely than low self-monitors to achieve promotions and to change employ-

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<sup>2</sup> For these preliminary tests, we created a  $k - 1$  set of dummy variables (Hosmer & Lemeshow, 1989) to represent categories of the job type variable, where  $k$  was the number of categories. For our purpose, only two dummy variables, supervisor and analyst, were created because a third dummy variable was perfectly predictable from knowledge of the others. Given the lack of significance for the dummy variables, we decided to collapse the three job type categories into the conceptually relevant supervisor/nonsupervisor dichotomy to facilitate correlational and logistic regression analysis and interpretation.

<sup>3</sup> Analyses including the nonsignificant control variables are available from either author.

**TABLE 1**  
**Descriptive Statistics and Correlations<sup>a</sup>**

Variables	Means	s.d.	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Self-monitoring	9.93	3.65						
2. Gender			-.10					
3. Job type			-.02	.07				
4. Job mobility	0.48	0.50	.32***	-.03	-.10			
5. Geographic mobility	0.39	0.49	.18*	.02	.03	.44***		
6. In-company promotions	0.42	0.49	-.08	.15	.00	-.50***	-.23*	
7. Cross-company promotions	0.36	0.48	.19*	-.08	-.11	.72***	.33***	-.39***

<sup>a</sup>  $N = 139$ ; all variables except self-monitoring are dichotomous, and Spearman correlations are reported.

\*  $p < .05$

\*\*\*  $p < .001$

ers and employment locations. The results shown in Table 2 indicate support for these predictions. High self-monitors were more likely to achieve cross-company promotions ( $p < .05$ ), change employers ( $p < .001$ ), and make geographical moves ( $p < .05$ ) than were low self-monitors. Self-monitoring level had no apparent effect on within-company promotions. Further, there were no significant nonlinear effects of self-monitoring on career outcomes in any of the analyses.

Table 2 shows that the goodness-of-fit chi-square for cross-company promotions was significant, indicating that the model did not fit equally well across the entire range of predictor values (Hosmer & Lemeshow, 1989: 143). An examination of the goodness-of-fit distribution revealed noticeable discrepancies around the middle of the predictor range between observed and expected frequencies. In other words, self-monitoring was a significant overall predictor of cross-company promotions, but predictions were better at the extremes of the self-monitoring distribution than around the middle.

Although each of the dependent variables considered in Table 2 is conceptually distinct, empirically they were highly intercorrelated, as Table 1 shows. The question arises, therefore, whether self-monitoring had an overall effect on the three job change variables considered as a set. Using a CATMOD multivariate test (SAS Institute, 1989: Chapter 17) appropriate for binary dependent variables, and controlling for gender and job type, we found that self-monitoring did significantly affect the set of dependent variables ( $\chi^2 = 15.81$ ,  $p < .05$ ).

Given the lack of a significant effect of self-monitoring on within-company promotions, we decided to examine these data more closely, looking only at the 72 individuals (over half the respondent group) who did not

**TABLE 2**  
**Results of Logistic Regression Analysis<sup>a</sup>**

Dependent Variables	Intercept		Self-Monitoring		Goodness-of-Fit Index <sup>b</sup>	Concordance Index	Pseudo R <sup>2c</sup>	Estimated Odds Ratios for Self-Monitoring <sup>d</sup>				
	b	s.e.	χ <sup>2</sup>	χ <sup>2</sup>				-1 s.d.	$\bar{x}$	+1 s.d.		
Cross-company promotions	-1.80	0.56	10.43*	0.12	0.05	5.61*	21.13*	0.61	0.04	2.14	3.32	5.15
Job mobility	-2.09	0.57	13.68***	0.20	0.05	14.29***	7.78	0.68	0.11	3.57	7.48	15.66
Geographic mobility	-1.59	0.54	8.63*	0.11	0.05	5.09*	13.47	0.61	0.04	2.03	3.07	4.67

<sup>a</sup> N = 139; beta coefficients are unstandardized.  
<sup>b</sup> A nonsignificant Hosmer-Lemeshow  $\chi^2$  (1989: 140-145) indicates good fit across the entire predictor range.  
<sup>c</sup> Computed by Aldrich and Nelson's (1984: 57) formula.  
<sup>d</sup> Computed by Hosmer and Lemeshow's (1989: 56) formula.

\* p < .05  
 \*\*\* p < .001

**TABLE 3**  
**Effects of Self-Monitoring on Within-Company Promotions for Those Who Stayed with First Employers<sup>a</sup>**

Dependent Variable	Intercept			Self-Monitoring			
	<i>b</i>	<i>s.e.</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>s.e.</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>
Within-company promotions	0.04	0.21	3.15	0.05	0.02	4.61*	.06

<sup>a</sup> *N* = 72; beta coefficients are unstandardized.

\* *p* < .05

change employers during the five years covered by the study. Because 13 percent of these individuals achieved more than one internal promotion, we did not dichotomize the data, but conducted an ordinary-least-squares regression analysis with self-monitoring as the independent variable. The results presented in Table 3 show that, considering only those respondents who did not change employers, high self-monitors achieved more internal promotions than low self-monitors ( $p < .05$ ).

How important an influence was self-monitoring on career mobility? The pseudo- $R^2$  values in Table 2 suggest that self-monitoring explained between 4 and 11 percent of the variance in career mobility, whereas the statistics in Table 3 indicate that self-monitoring explained 6 percent of the variance of within-company promotions. The estimated odds ratios in Table 2 show that a one-standard-deviation increase in self-monitoring score was associated with an approximately 55 percent increase in the likelihood of achieving a cross-company promotion, a 109 percent increase in the likelihood of changing employers, and a 51 percent increase in the likelihood of moving to another state or country.

## DISCUSSION

In support of the hypotheses, the results showed that high self-monitors were more mobile than low self-monitors across a range of outcomes related to managerial careers. The former were more likely to change employers and locations. The greater mobility of high self-monitors paid off in terms of more cross-company promotions for them than for the low self-monitors. Further, among the people who remained with their first employers, high self-monitors achieved more within-company promotions than low self-monitors.

The career strategies of high self-monitors, then, appear to be more successful in the managerial marketplace than those of low self-monitors. Being able to adapt their behavior to circumstances and being ready to follow opportunity to another employer or another place may have helped the high self-monitors get ahead. By contrast, the low self-monitoring quality of maintaining consistency in employment and location choices was not as successful in achieving promotions.

Building on Rosenbaum's (1979) analysis of the importance of the first

round of corporate promotion tournaments, our results suggest that low self-monitors are at greater risk than high self-monitors of being eliminated in that crucial round. The danger for low self-monitors is that, once eliminated, they will never be able to recover to challenge the high self-monitors for upper-level management positions. One hypothesis for future research is that upper management consists disproportionately of high self-monitors, because they will have benefited from success in early career tournaments and crowded out the low self-monitors.

If high self-monitors are outcompeting low self-monitors in the arenas of both within- and cross-company promotions, as the data suggest, a question arises: Are high self-monitors better performers? In addressing this question, it is helpful to consider the different dimensions of job performance, specifically, the distinction between task and contextual performance. Task performance is usually assessed as the proficiency with which job incumbents perform technical duties formally included in job descriptions, whereas contextual activities include such general behaviors as cooperating with others and following procedures even when the latter are personally inconvenient (Borman & Motowidlo, 1993: 73). Self-monitoring theory suggests no reason why high self-monitors would have superior task performance if such performance is understood to include only the technical aspects of jobs. The high self-monitors may, however, be better than the low self-monitors at contextual activities such as adapting their behavior to effectively cooperate with others (Caldwell & O'Reilly, 1982a). Furthermore, if technical skills are important mainly for lower-level jobs (Katz & Kahn, 1966: 312), and if much of managerial work involves communicating with others (Gronn, 1983), performing a variety of different roles (Mintzberg, 1973), and relating to the needs of a large number of diverse people (Kotter, 1982), then the impression management and interpersonal skills of high self-monitors may give them increasing advantages as they move up the corporate ladder.

Previous research has suggested that high self-monitors are more active than low self-monitors in searching for information about potential employers and analyzing their own interests and abilities (Snyder & Copeland, 1989: 8–9). Further, high self-monitors tend to rely more on their social networks when making career decisions (Kilduff, 1992). This greater receptivity to external information may help high self-monitors better informed than low self-monitors of market opportunities for their skills. Low self-monitors may not need to gather so much information from external sources concerning diverse career opportunities because they appear to have greater self-knowledge concerning career preferences than high self-monitors (Blustein, 1987). Thus, the two groups appear to use quite different career strategies. A high self-monitor may rely on an intensive search of the external environment for clues as to what kinds of careers are available, whereas a low self-monitor may rely on self-knowledge concerning the kind of career that he or she values.

The two groups are, therefore, likely to pose quite different challenges

for employers. The high self-monitors, with their active information networks and their ability to adapt their behavior to suit a range of different role demands, may be harder to retain than low self-monitors. Employers should be aware of the importance to high self-monitors of the images they project to others (Snyder & DeBono, 1985) and their preference for clearly defined roles and responsibilities (Snyder & Gangestad, 1982). To retain valued high self-monitors, therefore, employers may need to actively manage the external environments that help define the selves that these employees project. High self-monitors are likely to value such prestige-builders as public awards for striking achievements and are likely to be enjoy the challenge of moving between quite different well-defined roles.

By contrast, low self-monitors tend to value the freedom to pursue work compatible with their own interests rather than work that is prestigious or well-defined (Kilduff, 1992). These individuals may, therefore, tend to ignore directives from upper management if these interfere with what they consider to be important tasks (Snyder & Copeland, 1989: 13). To keep valued low self-monitors happy in their jobs, therefore, employers may need to allow them to create their own roles. It may be necessary for employers to give low self-monitors broad responsibility for carrying out tasks and to refrain from trying to micro-manage the details of their roles.

The significant effects of personality on career mobility demonstrated in the current research fly in the face of conventional wisdom concerning the inability of dispositional variables to predict behaviors relevant to organizations. Building on previous critiques of dispositional research (e.g., Davis-Blake & Pfeffer, 1989), we have carefully defined and measured a personality variable, self-monitoring, assessed its predictive validity using objective indicators of career mobility, and discussed the practical importance of our results in the context of previous research showing the importance of early career outcomes.

In order to discover personality effects of the kind discussed in this article, it may be necessary for researchers to investigate samples in which the confounding effects of other variables are controlled for. In the present study, we minimized the potential effects of such variables as M.B.A. program prestige, educational level, and vocational choice by choosing respondents homogenous on these dimensions.

There are, of course, limitations to the present study, including its reliance on self-reported job changes. Individuals who experienced job changes (particularly promotions) may have been more likely than those who did not to respond to alumni office requests for information, thereby potentially inflating the aggregate level of mobility experienced by the respondent group. A further limitation concerns the absence of salary information for the individuals studied. Recent research has suggested that salary increases are linked to job moves (Gomez-Mejia & Balkin, 1992). High self-monitors may, therefore, have achieved higher salaries as a result of their greater job mobility.

Research on twins has suggested a possible genetic source of self-

monitoring differences (Gangestad & Snyder, 1985). The twin studies imply that an individual's self-monitoring tendency does not easily lend itself to alteration. In the present longitudinal research, self-monitoring effects were evident over a period of five years. The chameleon-like high self-monitors and the true-to-themselves low self-monitors may indeed exhibit characteristic patterns of behavior for not just five years, but over the full courses of their careers.

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