

How do we anticipate work?

A person-centered investigation of work prospection

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INTRODUCTION

Research on work-related thinking has predominantly focused on present- and past-oriented perspectives, with limited attention to how individuals think about the future.

The concept of **work prospection** was introduced and defined as conscious or spontaneous thoughts about one’s future work. These thoughts may involve cognitive and/or affective connotations, which can be either positive or negative (Rutten et al., 2023).

Understanding work prospection is important not only for differentiating between stable and dynamic forms of future-oriented thinking, but also for uncovering its personality underpinnings, capturing chronic versus situational patterns, and identifying distinct individual profiles—each with practical implications for supporting well-being and adaptive functioning at work.

While previous studies have investigated work prospection within individuals using a within-person approach (Rutten et al., 2023), its validity as a stable characteristic and its use in between-person designs, which highlight individual and stable differences in anticipating future tasks and goals, remain unexplored.

This study adopts both variable-centered and person-centered approaches to examine work prospection as a trait, its relationships with personal and work-related characteristics, as well as its implications for employee well-being and performance.

RESULTS

1. Confirmatory and exploratory factor analyses

Analyses revealed three distinct dimensions of work prospection with strong psychometric properties ($\chi^2(51) = 168.315$; RMSEA = .053; CFI = .977; TLI = .971; SRMR = .036).

These dimensions were related yet distinct from constructs such as *dispositional optimism*, *future time orientation*, *trait anxiety*, and *workplace anxiety*, supporting their convergent and discriminant validity ($\chi^2(608) = 1438.483$; RMSEA = .041; CFI = .949; TLI = .944; SRMR = .040).

2. Latent Profile Analysis

Analysis revealed six employee profiles based on the dimensions of work prospection: *Low-Cognitive Forward-Thinker*, *Anxious Forward-Thinker*, *Balanced Forward-Thinker*, *Low Forward-Thinker*, *Positive Forward-Thinker*, and *Cognitive-Anxious Forward-Thinker*. The profiles were mainly differentiated on their levels and shapes of cognitive and negative affective work prospection, while one profile presented high levels of positive affective work prospection and low levels of negative affective work prospection.

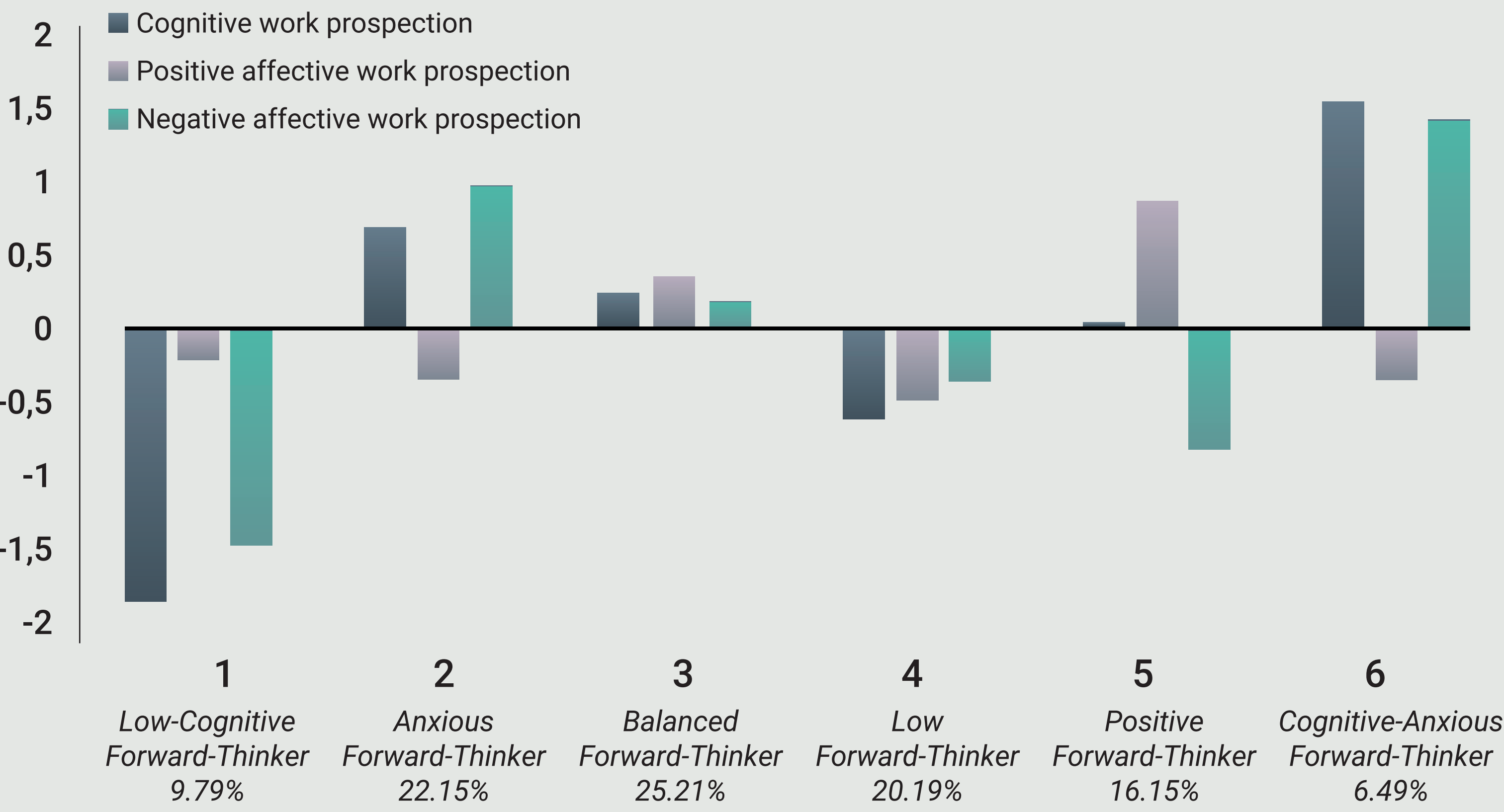
METHODS

1. Participants and procedure

Data were collected through a cross-sectional survey conducted among 822 workers in the French-speaking part of Belgium ($M_{age} = 40.83$, $SD = 11.32$). Of the total participants, 177 identified as men (21.5%), 483 as women (58.1%), 4 as “other” (0.5%), and 158 (19.2%) did not report their gender. The average organizational tenure was 11.59 years ($SD = 10.16$). Participants worked in various sectors, with the majority employed in the education (31.1%) and health (10%) sectors.

2. Measures

Construct	α	Example item
Work prospection (Rutten et al., 2023)		
Cognitive work prospection	.91	<i>I think about the work I still have to do</i>
Positive affective work prospection	.91	<i>I look forward to the workdays ahead of me</i>
Negative affective work prospection	.94	<i>I feel nervous about work tasks I still have to finish</i>
Trait anxiety (Spitzer et al., 2006)	.90	<i>I am feeling nervous, anxious or on edge</i>
Dispositional optimism (Scheier et al., 1994)	.80	<i>I’m always optimistic about my future</i>
Workplace anxiety (McCarthy et al., 2016)	.92	<i>I worry about not receiving a positive job performance evaluation</i>
Future time orientation (Shipp et al., 2009)	.89	<i>I think about what my future has in store</i>
Workload (Spector et al., 1999)	.89	<i>How often does your job require you to work very hard?</i>
Job clarity (Fouquereau et al., 2013)	.78	<i>Do you know exactly what other people expect of you in your work?</i>
Autonomy (Bigot et al., 2013)	.81	<i>This work allows me to decide for myself how I will carry out my professional tasks</i>
Transformational leadership (Carless et al., 2000)	.96	<i>My supervisor communicates a clear and positive vision of the future</i>
Emotional exhaustion (Maslach et al., 1996)	.90	<i>I feel emotionally drained from my work</i>
Work engagement (Schaufeli et al., 2006)	.93	<i>At my job, I feel strong and vigorous</i>
In-role performance (Williams et al., 1991)	.65	<i>I fulfill responsibilities specified in my job description</i>
Extra-role performance (Eisenberger et al., 2010)	.54	<i>I look for ways to make my organization more successful</i>



	1 Low-Cognitive Forward-Thinker 9.79%	2 Anxious Forward-Thinker 22.15%	3 Balanced Forward-Thinker 25.21%	4 Low Forward-Thinker 20.19%	5 Positive Forward-Thinker 16.15%	6 Cognitive-Anxious Forward-Thinker 6.49%
Antecedents	Anxiety --- Workload --- Autonomy ---	Anxiety +++ Workload +++	Anxiety ~ Workload ~ Transformational leadership +	Anxiety -- Workload -	Anxiety --- Workload --- Job clarity + Transformational leadership ++	Anxiety +++ Workload +++
Consequences	Exhaustion -- Engagement - Performance ++	Exhaustion +++ Engagement -- Performance --	Exhaustion ~ Engagement + Performance ~	Exhaustion ~ Engagement --- Performance ~	Exhaustion --- Engagement +++ Performance ++	Exhaustion +++ Engagement ~ Performance ~

DISCUSSION

These findings enhance our understanding of future-oriented, work-related thinking and provide evidence supporting the convergent and discriminant validity of work prospection as a trait-based construct.

Six distinct profiles were identified, differing both in terms of levels and shapes of cognitive, positive affective, and negative affective prospections .

These profiles were significantly differentiated by personality traits, working conditions, and leadership style.

Moreover, the distinct profiles significantly predicted employee well-being and performance, highlighting the importance of integrating future-oriented perspectives into organizational psychology research.

Overall, employee profiles characterized by higher levels of positive affective work prospection tended to report lower levels of trait and workplace anxiety, as well as more supportive working conditions. These profiles were also associated with more favorable work-related outcomes, whereas those marked by higher levels of negative affective prospection showed less adaptive patterns.

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