



Gender variation in the antecedents of task advice network size: Organizational tenure and core self-evaluations

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ABSTRACT

Research finds gender differences in the size, quality, and consequences of social networks in the workplace. Building on these studies, we focus on one type of social network: task advice networks, which we define as the networks that act as conduits for information and knowledge directly related to work task completion. Using data on over 1300 employees, we test the relationships between task advice network size and two variables – organizational tenure and core self-evaluations, examining differences by gender. We find a larger positive association between core self-evaluations and task advice network size for men than for women. Additionally, we find that men, but not women, have larger networks when lower in tenure.

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1. Introduction

Workplace networks are sets of relationships that act as conduits through which resources such as strategic information, norms, and social support flow. One of many network types, task advice networks, allow “employees [to] share information and knowledge related to the completion of their work” (Zagenczyk & Murrell, 2009, pp. 139–140). Task advice networks are of particular interest for two related reasons. First, they are unusual in that they have roots in both formal and informal structures. Unlike friendship networks, not all task advice network contacts are informal. Formal organizational hierarchies may designate advisors, but workers may also build informal relationships with those outside their work group to get advice that they cannot get from their formal advisors.

Because task advice networks can include contacts external to the immediate work group, they can lead to higher group effectiveness by making a greater knowledge variety available to the work group (Wong, 2008b). Second, while various other networks, such as social support networks, are critical for workers to advance their careers effectively, in terms of gaining entry into (Granovetter, 1973, 1974; Huffman & Torres, 2002) and moving up through organizations (Burt, 1980; Podolny & Baron, 1997), the connection between these networks and how good people are at getting their work done is indirect at best. In contrast, task advice networks have an obvious connection to individual worker performance because they deal with specific work task content. Existing research finds a connection between task advice networks and various employee outcomes, such as job involvement and work-unit commitment (Zagenczyk & Murrell, 2009). Because organizations have both the ability to shape task advice networks through formal programs and a vested interest in doing so, task advice networks have direct practical interest.

Despite the enduring interest in gender differences in networks (Loscocco, Monnat, Moore, & Lauber, 2009),

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compared to the body of literature on gender differences in social support and discussion networks, comparatively few studies address gender differences in task advice networks (Podolny & Baron, 1997). This paper contributes to the literature on task advice networks by investigating potential gender differences in the associations between structural factors, personality characteristics, and task advice network size. We draw on literature on gender differences and networks in general to provide insight. As Loscocco et al. (2009) discuss, much of the existing literature implicitly uses one of two general perspectives. First, the structural perspective posits that most of the gender differences in the size, characteristics, and network efficacy are attributable to structural characteristics such as work history. According to this perspective, if men and women had equivalent occupational status, work histories, family situations, and time spent working, their networks would closely resemble each other as well. For instance, McGuire (2000) argues that the networks of women include many lower-status coworkers largely because women's typical structural positions within organizations, such as occupation and level of hierarchy, constrain their ability to make contact with and build relationships with higher status employees. Second, the gender construction perspective suggests that, even controlling for structural position, a substantial gap will remain in the antecedents, size, quality, and outcomes of women's and men's networks because deep-seated norms and beliefs ensure that men and women never really occupy the same structural position. Research from this perspective draws on social constructionism in general, which posits that even the most objective-seeming knowledge relies on social interactions (Berger & Luckmann, 1966), and more specifically on social construction of gender theory, which focuses on how gender-appropriate performances help to define and reproduce gender (Butler, 1990). This perspective is implicit in much networking research because women in the same structural positions are understood to have different networks due to norms and beliefs created and reproduced by repeated social interactions. For instance, Burt's (1998) study of early promotion suggests that existing network members may not view certain people – women – as legitimate group members. Loscocco et al. (2009) argue that while most literature related to gender and networks draws on one of these two perspectives, some research can bridge the two perspectives. Ibarra (1997) finds that many differences between men's and women's networks are substantially smaller or disappear when controlling for structural position, but some differences remain, such as homophily.

In the present paper, we expand on the scant literature on task advice networks, drawing on the gender construction perspective to consider some ways in which the same structural position and personal characteristics may influence task advice network size differently for men and women. We identify one structural and one personality characteristic that, even if the same for men and women, might have different effects on task advice network size. We treat organizational tenure, the time that people have been working at their organizations, as a

representative structural factor² and core self-evaluations, the “fundamental assessments that people make about their worthiness, competence, and capabilities” (Judge, Bono, Erez, & Locke, 2005, p. 257), as a representative personality characteristic. We use the central tenets of the gender construction perspective to sensitize us to ways that the gendered life course shapes the association between a work overload, core self-evaluations (CSEs), and task advice network size, and test hypotheses drawn from various research streams using 2007 survey data from over 1300 respondents working in the United States, clustered within 12 departments at 9 organizations.

1.1. Organizational tenure

Previous literature suggests that the relationship between organizational tenure and workplace networks depends on the network type. For instance, Mehra, Kildugg, and Brass (2001) find that tenure is positively related to centrality in friendship networks, which consists of friends, and not-in-workflow networks, which consists of work partners. Task advice networks overlap both network types in that formal job positions may influence the advice type that workers need, but they do not determine whom workers feel comfortable asking for advice. However, disparate literature suggests that task advice network size is negatively associated with organizational tenure for two reasons. First, as tenure increases, firm-specific human capital, which refers to the skills, knowledge, and competencies needed to succeed within a specific firm (Slaughter, Ang, & Boh, 2007), is likely to increase as well. Workers become proficient at their jobs and when they do need advice, they can more easily identify which coworkers are the best sources. Second, when longer tenured workers consider how long they expect to remain employed in their current career, whether at their current or another employer, the anticipated time until departure may affect employees' perspectives about which relationships are worth the time investment needed to develop and maintain them. Socio-emotional selectivity theory, as Carstensen, Isaacowitz, and Charles (1999) describe, suggests that people become increasingly selective in the activities, relationships, and roles in which they choose to engage as they age due to these differences in their time horizons. To the extent that organizational tenure represents a form of organizational aging with longer tenured workers expecting a shorter time horizon for their careers, the insights of this theory might help to understand network shrinkage over time. Younger adults, who often have short tenures in their current careers and jobs, generally expect years of developing or expanding work-related competencies leading to their focus on future goals and achievements. Older adults, who often have longer tenures in their current careers and

² Other structural variables are also included as controls. In particular, occupation is a key structural characteristic, but the occupational breakdown available in our survey data is so closely tied to the participating organizations that it poses problems for interpretation. To avoid this, we did not select occupation as a key predictor.

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