



Effects of vocational training on unemployed youths' work motivation and work engagement: Mediating roles of training adequacy and self-actualization

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ABSTRACT

This study investigated work motivation and work engagement, along with their associated factors, among unemployed young people participating in vocational training schemes in Tianjin, China. Derived from a sample of 209 young trainees (mean age = 22.67, SD = 1.93), the results supported the hypotheses that training adequacy and self-actualization showed positive effects on work motivation and work engagement. Furthermore, training variables (the number of training courses attended and duration of workplace training) did not present any significant direct effect on either work motivation or work engagement; however, they predicted the two outcome variables indirectly through the mediating effects of training adequacy and self-actualization. The study implied that power, skills, and other resources gained during the training provided fuel for motivation and performance. The study also advanced the human capital development approach by unraveling the mechanism through which hard skills and soft skills contribute to youth empowerment and employment. The implications of these present findings for theory, practice, and policy were also discussed.

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1. Introduction

China has witnessed increasing youth unemployment over the years. The youth unemployment rate of 16% in China is substantially higher than the overall unemployment rate of 4% (Dasgupta & Huynh, 2012). According to a recent report issued by the Ministry of Human Resources and Social Security, in 100 selected Chinese cities, the unemployed group accounts for 51.7% of all job seekers. Of these, 23.1% are young people who are unemployed for the first time, a rate second only to migrant workers (36.4%) (China Human Resources Market Information Monitoring Center, 2015). Clearly, unemployment particularly affects youth, typically aged between 14 and 30 years (Huang, 2003). Unemployment not only brings about financial difficulties, but also poses a threat to one's subjective well-being and inclusion in mainstream society (Bell & Blanchflower, 2011; Cruces, Ham, & Viollaz, 2012; Kieselbach, 2013; Zeng, 2012).

Vocational training is becoming a focal service of the human capital development approach that is emphasized in China (Lu & Feng, 2008). Both private employment centers and public agencies are active in providing training. However, official documents and empirical studies have primarily focused on employers' skill requirements for young people in

transition to the labor market, and in most cases have relied on single indicators, such as the participation rate or employment rate. Further examinations of the factors motivating youths' will to secure jobs need to enrich our understanding of the volume and quality of the training. Those factors may include work motivation, work engagement, training adequacy, and self-actualization.

In this study, work motivation refers to a set of internal forces that initiate work-related behavior and determine its form, direction, intensity, and duration (Pinder, 2014). Work engagement refers to a positive work-related state of fulfillment characterized by vigor, dedication, and absorption (Bakker, Schaufeli, Leiter, & Taris, 2008). Being strongly involved in work and willing to invest efforts, engaged workers are usually fully committed and happily engrossed in their work, and experience a sense of significance, enthusiasm, and inspiration (Schaufeli, Salanova, González-Roma, & Bakker, 2002). It is therefore of crucial importance to promote unemployed youths' work motivation and work engagement in response to the alienating or disempowering life experience. Vocational training, in this study, refers to employment services provided outside school in order to upgrade the unemployed youths' competence in either soft or hard skills (Rowold, 2008). Training adequacy, also known as the adequacy of training, indicates whether the training received is sufficient to deliver an optimal rate of skill formation (Green, Felstead, Gallie, Inanc, & Jewson, 2013). Lastly, self-actualization refers to a high level of personal empowerment, according to the humanist perspective (Maslow, 1998). These supply-side factors closely connect

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to each other. Adequate training in hard skills is critical for boosting job-appropriate competence and employability, while enhanced soft skills are particularly essential for emotional regulation and teamwork in coping with an increasingly competitive labor market. Both of these elements contribute to work motivation and engagement through increased self-awareness and assertiveness to aid survival in an increasingly competitive, restructured labor market (Maxwell, 2007; Smyth, 2008; Taylor & Tyler, 2000).

This study takes Tianjin as an example due to its special role as the National Innovation and Demonstration Zone of Modern Vocational Education Reform (Ren & Wang, 2011). Traditionally a base of many heavy industries and state-owned enterprises, Tianjin has suffered from the economic restructuring and the corresponding unemployment risks. The number of working-age people registered as unemployed in Tianjin reached 217,000 (3.6%) in 2013 (National Bureau of Statistics, 2014). For young people, the unemployment rate was also higher than were those of other eastern coastal regions (Wu, 2009). A substantive training scheme has been launched in collaboration with various enterprises since 2008 to serve unemployed young people (Tianjin Municipal People's Government, 2014). Participants enjoy free training and accreditation at government-subsidized agencies or enterprises, and obtain recommendations upon completion of their training. Allowances will also be available to those who have acquired vocational certifications. Through catering to the needs of different youth groups (e.g., those who are unemployed for the first time or the newly laid-off), these training schemes share a common emphasis on building both hard skills and soft skills in their training contents. This emphasis is evident in the official documents, that is, to promote participants' vocational competence and to upgrade their work attitudes. Specifically, this initiative aims at encouraging young people's responsibility, enabling the choice and exploration of personal potentials, fostering hopes, and eventually facilitating their adaptation to the changing work environments (Tianjin Municipal People's Government, 2014). Although theoretically sound, scarce empirical work has attempted to verify this dual approach on human capital development (Cheung & Ngai, 2010). Moreover, the interplay between supply-side factors requires further examination. To address this issue, the present study sets out to explain the influence of key training elements on work motivation and work engagement, especially through mediation by training adequacy and self-actualization.

2. Literature review and hypothesis development

2.1. The empowerment approach, work motivation, work engagement, and vocational training

Growing out of dissatisfaction with the age-old problems of hierarchical and bureaucratic Taylorized workplaces, which stifle workers' creativity and alienate workers, the empowerment approach has upheld a form of employee involvement initiative and focused on task-based engagement and attitudinal change ever since the 1980s (Wilkinson, 1998). Empowerment in practice engages this goal in a wide range of schemes, varying from training, information sharing, and decision making to realization of autonomy (Lashley, 2012; Wilkinson, 1998). An empowering culture exemplified by the above-mentioned components would encourage self-exploration, social recognition, and eventually power realization (Shim, 2010). By sharing inextricably connected interests with training agencies, participants would be equipped with more of the resources, knowledge, competence, and creativity needed for establishing a fulfillment-based work motivation and becoming more engaged in work (Henderson, 2004; Knudsen, Aaron Johnson, Martin, & Roman, 2003).

Work motivation reflects how people understand what their work means, how they are likely to carry out their jobs in accordance with these meanings, and why they work in the first place (Peterson, Park, Hall, & Seligman, 2009; Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001). Work

motivation is concerned with and tends to approach positive incentives and avoid negative incentives. There is ample evidence for the positive and reciprocal association between workers' productive motivation with the length of employment, job performance, and job satisfaction (Jex & Britt, 2014; Mitchell & Daniels, 2003).

Work engagement represents a unique and important personal construct of well-being and thriving at work that is related to, but distinct from, job satisfaction and is also significantly related to job performance (Christian, Garza, & Slaughter, 2011). Not only is work engagement integral to employability, which covers competence in adapting to work (Lindsay, McQuaid, & Dutton, 2007), but it is also instrumental to work persistence, performance, and quality (Furnham, 2005). Hence, as a quality of work, work engagement deserves attention and related research.

The principal impetus for the study is the existing arguments about the effectiveness of vocational training schemes and the ways in which they could be improved. While some researchers believe that training raises unemployed youths' interpersonal skills, job performance, and work attitudes or ethics (Hammer, 2007), others consider it to be less effective or even futile for unemployed youth (Blank, 2002; Lafer, 2004; Lerman, 2000), especially those who do not have previous work experience or commitment (Mangum, 1999). As evidenced in the United States, compared with work-first or labor force attachment programs, human capital development programs—which provide recipients with more training and educational opportunities—yielded better long-term outcomes, such as higher earnings or more working hours (Freedman et al., 2000). Yet empirical evidence from other Chinese societies like Hong Kong indicates that training schemes for human capital development were not perceived to be as empowering as expected, primarily due to the programs' inability to address wider structural change and the recipients' lack of commitment to lifelong learning (Ngai & Ngai, 2006). The current study investigates an employment training scheme in Tianjin, a Chinese context, and explores the association between key training elements and work-related attitudes—*work motivation* and *work engagement*—among youth with respect to their talent and preference.

2.2. Training adequacy as a mediator

Training adequacy serves as an indicator of the empowerment strategy, and reflects how well or poorly the training market is functioning. The reflection typically transpires in the reports of employees or line managers (Green et al., 2013). As an indispensable vehicle to strengthen human capital, effective training schemes aim at improving both hard and soft skills. The hard skills are job-specific, productivity-oriented, and comprised of a set of *workplace competencies*—the ability to allocate resources, acquire and use information, understand systems, and work well with technology—along with *thinking skills*, which include creative thinking, decision-making, problem solving, reasoning, and an ability to learn. The soft skills, on the other hand, are relatively general, tend to be emotion-based, and are commonly encapsulated in forms of *personal qualities* such as responsibility, self-esteem, sociability, self-management, integrity, and honesty (Maxwell, 2007; Secretary's Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills, 1992). There is a growing literature emphasizing the importance of a more diverse set of skills, especially soft skills, that workers may bring to or develop during their labor-market careers (Côté, Mizokami, Roberts, & Nakama, 2015; Duncan & Dunifon, 2012; Ibarraran, Ripani, Taboada, Villa, & Garcia, 2014).

Mounting evidence suggests that vocational training or other employment services are conducive to skills improvement (Lerman, 2013). Skills acquired from training are beneficial to both work performance (Sturges, Guest, Conway, & Davey, 2002) and employment opportunities for unemployed people, including youth (Gottschalk, 1998). Furthermore, in line with the empowerment theory, raising personal and/or interpersonal competency in working, managing,

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