Factors impacting the perceived organizational support of IT employees

Myria W. Allen [a,*], Deborah J. Armstrong [b], Margaret F. Reid [a], Cynthia K. Riemenschneider [c]

[a] University of Arkansas, United States
[b] Florida State University, United States
[c] Baylor University, United States

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ABSTRACT

Organizations today face shortages of IT personnel. We investigated workplace factors in one state government in hope of identifying factors that influence perceived organizational support (POS) within an IT work environment. A combination of job characteristics (challenging job and perceived workload), job stressors (work exhaustion, role conflict, and role ambiguity), and the organization's discretionary actions (pay-for-performance and mentoring opportunities) were measured and hierarchical regression was used to determine the relationships. Four control variables were also included (age, gender, organizational tenure, and professional *versus* administrator status). Role ambiguity, role conflict, work exhaustion, career mentoring, and pay-for-performance together explained 62% of the variance in the IT employees' POS. Career mentoring and role ambiguity explained most of the variance.

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1. Introduction

Recently IS enrollments in US universities have dropped significantly [13] causing a severe shortage of new graduates in the workforce. This is negatively impacting IT departments: as the workforce shrinks, stress on the IS employees increases while managers worry about retaining personnel with valuable domain knowledge and critical to the organization. According to a news report [19], almost 87% of state governments lack the IT personnel they need.

While the IS community has investigated ways to boost retention by increasing organizational commitment and job satisfaction (e.g., [15]), few have studied perceived organizational support (POS) [1], which is the level of support from their organization, as perceived by employees, in return for their effort to help the organization reach its goals. In the general management literature, the link between POS and either voluntary turnover or retention is well documented. It has also been linked to increased job attendance, objective measures of in-role job performance,

increased likelihood of helping coworkers, more constructive suggestions for improving the organization's operation, etc. Additional information regarding the theoretical roots of the POS concept and several of the other concepts (e.g., autonomy, task variety, role ambiguity, role conflict, pay, demographics) was discussed in Rhoades and Eisenberger's [21] 2002 meta-analysis of over 70 POS studies.

We decided to study retention of public sector IT employees in one state government in the south-central USA. The purpose of the study was to identify factors that influence POS within an IT work environment. In our study, job factors believed to be especially important were considered: characteristics (challenging job, task variety, autonomy, and perceived workload), stressors (work exhaustion, role conflict, and ambiguity), and discretionary actions that organizations take (pay-for-performance and providing mentoring opportunities) [7].

2. Background and hypothesis development

2.1. Perceived organizational support

POS is the employees' view of how much the organization values their contribution and cares about them. Employees see their employment as a reciprocal exchange relationship that reflects relative dependence and extends beyond a formal contract.

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* Corresponding author at: Department of Communication, 417 Kimpel Hall, University of Arkansas, Fayetteville, AR 72701, United States. Tel.: +1 479 575 5952; fax: +1 479 575 6734.
E-mail address: myria@uark.edu (M.W. Allen).

Employees need to determine whether, and to what extent, an organization will recognize and reward their effort, support their socio-emotional needs, and help them on request. According to organizational support theory, in return for a high level of support, employees work harder to help their organization reach its goals [2], providing loyalty and effort in return for material and social rewards.

We considered the potential antecedents of POS to be job characteristics, stressors, and rewards.

2.2. Job characteristics

Building on social exchange theory research, scholars argue that POS is influenced substantially by management's actions that employees perceive as being voluntary rather than mandated by external entities or environmental conditions; the four job characteristics normally considered are: challenging work, autonomy, task variety, and perceived workload.

2.2.1. Job challenge

Challenge reflects an individual's desire to be stimulated by the job; it can be quantified as the degree that the job requires a variety of skills. IT employees have a high need for challenging work. The opportunity for challenging work is intrinsically satisfying. POS should therefore be associated with an IT work environment that provides employees with job-related challenges. Thus:

H1. There will be a positive relationship between IT employees' perceived level of job-related challenge and their level of POS.

2.2.2. Autonomy

The extent to which individuals can schedule work, determine what actions are required, and decide how best to execute their actions is important for their satisfaction with the job. The more perceived autonomy, the more responsible the individual will feel for the outcomes. Perceived autonomy has been positively linked to increased motivation, satisfaction, and work effectiveness of IS professionals [10]. Yamaguchi [25] found a strong positive relationship between autonomy and POS in a Japanese environment. This leads to our second hypothesis:

H2. There will be a positive relationship between IT employees' perceived level of job-related autonomy and their level of POS.

2.2.3. Task variety

A high variety of unexpected or new events in the work process means that there is uncertainty about future tasks, and that many of them are non-routine or cannot be precisely defined in advance. IT employees generally are happy if given moderate levels of task variety and moderate task variety has been seen as an antecedent to POS. The third hypothesis was therefore:

H3. There will be a positive relationship between IT employees' perceived level of job-related task variety and their level of POS.

2.2.4. Perceived workload

Two discretionary ways managers seek to keep down labor costs is to increase employees' workload and ask them to work extra hours. IT employees are often asked to take on heavy workloads and tight deadlines, leading to long hours, late nights, after-hour meetings, on-call duty, and a continual state of 'fire-fighting' or crisis situations. The state of Missouri conducted an IT environmental scan including input from 23 agencies and found increased workload resulted in dissatisfaction and demotivation [17]. Therefore, we expected high perceived workload to have a strongly negative relationship with POS. The fourth hypothesis was:

H4. There will be a negative relationship between IT employees' perceived workload and their level of POS.

2.3. Stressors

Job-related stressors result from discretionary decisions that management makes on structuring IT jobs. If employees attribute job-related stressors to conditions an organization can control then these stressors should reduce POS. Given the "24 h per day, seven days a week" schedule of many IT employees, constant deadlines, and staffing pressures are likely to result in a strong negative relationship between work exhaustion and POS. We expected to find similar negative relationships. In addition, due to IT workers having to meet the needs of multiple customers (some with conflicting goals), the relationships between role conflict and POS could be stronger than in other disciplines.

2.3.1. Work exhaustion

Depletion of emotional and mental resources in meeting job demands is widespread among software developers. IT workers suffering from work exhaustion have greater turnover intention. POS has been negatively associated with work exhaustion and other psychosomatic symptoms [11]. Thus the fifth hypothesis was:

H5. There will be a negative relationship between IT employees' perceived level of work exhaustion and their level of POS.

2.3.2. Role ambiguity

Role ambiguity occurs when the instructions given to a person is uncertain, unclear, or inadequate. The IT work environment has the potential for high role ambiguity [20] and person-job fit theory has been used to explain the relationship between IT developers' perceived role stress and job satisfaction/organizational commitment [14].

Findings about the role of ambiguity in the POS relationship have been mixed, with a significant negative correlation between POS and role ambiguity reported. Some researchers reported a causal relationship in which role ambiguity was an antecedent of POS or identified POS as a moderator between role ambiguity and intent to remain with an organization [23]. Thus, the sixth hypothesis was:

H6. There will be a negative relationship between IT employees' perceived level of role ambiguity and their level of POS.

2.3.3. Role conflict

The perception of incompatible or incongruent demands placed on an incumbent occurs because of the need to meet the requirements of multiple customers, frequent use of project teams, and rapidly changing technologies or processes and often results in high role conflict (see [9]). There is a significant negative correlation between POS and role conflict, but there may be a causal relationship between role conflict and POS or POS may moderate the effect of role conflict on voluntary turnover intention. Thus the seventh hypothesis was: