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Examining calling as a double-edged sword for employability

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ABSTRACT

Using a two-study design (total $N = 1232$), this paper examines the relationship between calling and employability. We suggest that, on the one hand, calling can positively relate to employability due to individuals' engagement in proactive professional development (PPD). On the other hand, calling can negatively relate to employability due to the career inflexibility that is associated with having a calling. The results of Study 1 revealed that calling does not directly relate to employability. When accounting for PPD in the calling-employability relationship, we found that calling positively and indirectly relates to occupational expertise dimension of employability, while it relates negatively and directly to personal flexibility dimension of employability. Findings from Study 2 showed that calling indirectly relates to employability both positively through PPD and negatively through career inflexibility. The findings from the two studies suggest the double-edged nature of a calling in relation to employability. The importance of these findings for understanding the career-related outcomes of calling is discussed.

1. Introduction

Over the past decade, both scholars and practitioners have shown a growing interest in understanding work as a calling, that is purposeful, meaningful, and passion-driven engagement in a career that one feels drawn to pursue (Bunderson & Thompson, 2009; Dik & Duffy, 2009; Dobrow & Tosti-Kharas, 2011; Elangovan, Pinder, & McLean, 2010; Hall & Chandler, 2005). Calling has been linked to greater career satisfaction (e.g., Dobrow & Tosti-Kharas, 2011), career commitment (e.g., Duffy, Dik, & Steger, 2011), career planning (e.g., Hirschi & Hermann, 2013), and career adaptability (Douglass & Duffy, 2015; Xie, Xia, Xin, & Zhou, 2016). However, little attention has been paid to understanding how calling relates to employability, which is the ability to obtain and retain a job (Fugate, Kinicki, & Ashforth, 2004; Van der Heijde & Van der Heijden, 2006). This is surprising, given high unemployment rates and the low job security provided by organizations (Waters, Briscoe, Hall, & Wang, 2014), which limits possibilities for individuals to pursue a purposeful career. Therefore, examining the relationship between calling and employability is both timely and necessary if we are to understand the likelihood of individuals with a calling to secure jobs that align with their calling in these uncertain economic times.

The sparse research to date that has addressed the relationship between calling and employability reports conflicting findings. In particular, studies among young adults show that calling is associated with greater employability (Praskova, Creed, & Hood, 2015a) and accounts for a stronger positive relationship between career preparation and employability (Praskova, Creed, & Hood, 2015b). This line of reasoning is supported by Hall and Chandler's (2005) calling theory of career success, as well as by prior empirical research that shows calling to be associated with important antecedents of employability, such as identity clarity and self-efficacy (e.g., Dobrow & Tosti-Kharas, 2011; Fugate et al., 2004; Hirschi, 2012). In contrast, several scholars have implied a potentially

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negative relationship between calling and employability. For instance, Fraher and Gabriel (2014) reported that pilots with a calling struggle with pursuing employment opportunities in domains other than their calling. Similarly, Dobrow and Tosti-Kharas (2012) and Cardador and Caza (2012) identified the “unhealthy” pursuit of a calling, which is exhibited by work identity inflexibility and unwillingness to listen to discouraging career-related advice from trusted mentors. Other scholars have also suggested that calling may undermine the attainment of competencies and expertise that are outside the calling domain (Berkelaar & Buzzanell, 2015; Newport, 2012) but that are necessary for employability (Arthur, Khapova, & Richardson, 2017; Fugate et al., 2004; Van der Heijde & Van der Heijden, 2006). While these studies suggest that calling could have a negative relationship with employability, to our knowledge, this assumption has not been tested before nor is there research that empirically examines how this negative relationship may be in place.

This paper examines how calling relates to employability and addresses the previous conflicting findings with regard to this relationship. Similar to previous studies (e.g., Duffy, Douglass, Autin, & Allan, 2014; Praskova et al., 2015a), we use Hall and Chandler's (2005) calling theory of career success and the literature on self-regulation (Lord, Diefendorff, Schmidt, & Hall, 2010; Wrosch, Scheier, Miller, Schulz, & Carver, 2003) as a theoretical basis for our hypotheses. We examine how calling relates to employability in two studies. First, we argue that viewing one's career as a calling should positively relate to employability, especially because of individuals' engagement in proactive professional development (Hall & Chandler, 2005; Van der Heijde & Van der Heijden, 2006). We test this assumption in both studies. Next, we suggest that calling may also negatively relate to employability due to the career inflexibility (i.e., lack of openness to alternative career considerations and job changes) associated with it (Cardador & Caza, 2012; Porfeli, Lee, Vondracek, & Weigold, 2011; Wrosch et al., 2003). We test this assumption in Study 2.

This paper makes the following important contributions to the literature. First, by examining the relationship between calling and employability, we contribute to research on career-related outcomes of calling (e.g., Duffy & Dik, 2013; Hirschi, 2011) and employability (Praskova et al., 2015a, 2015b). We show that calling relates indirectly to employability through proactive professional development (PPD) on the one hand and career inflexibility on the other hand. By focusing on the mediating effect of PPD in the calling-employability relationship, this paper addresses the need for a better understanding of how calling relates to career-related behavioral outcomes (Duffy & Dik, 2013; Elangovan et al., 2010). By focusing on the mediating effect of career inflexibility in the calling-employability relationship, this paper provides an additional empirical examination of the argument that individuals with a calling may have a rigid view of their careers (Cardador & Caza, 2012; Dobrow & Tosti-Kharas, 2012; Fraher & Gabriel, 2014).

Second, by showing that calling can relate to employability both positively (through PPD) and negatively (through career inflexibility), we extend research that acknowledges a “dark side” of calling (e.g., Berg, Grant, & Johnson, 2010; Dobrow & Tosti-Kharas, 2012; Duffy, Douglass, Autin, England, & Dik, 2016; Gazica & Spector, 2015) and contribute to the limited research that explicitly points at the double-edged nature of a calling (e.g., Berkelaar & Buzzanell, 2015; Bunderson & Thompson, 2009). In so doing, our findings address Duffy and Dik's (2013) call for research that acknowledges the “dark sides” of calling.

Fig. 1 depicts the overall hypothesized model and explains the two-study structure of the paper.

2. Experiencing work as a calling

Following leading definitions of calling, we suggest that calling constitutes meaningful and/or purposeful engagement in a (work) domain, job, or profession that originates from external summons (Dik & Duffy, 2009), a sense of duty or destiny (Bunderson & Thompson, 2009), or identity (Dobrow & Tosti-Kharas, 2011). Calling is also often pro-social in nature, meaning that viewing one's career as a calling includes a desire to make the world a better place (Bunderson & Thompson, 2009; Dik & Duffy, 2009; Elangovan

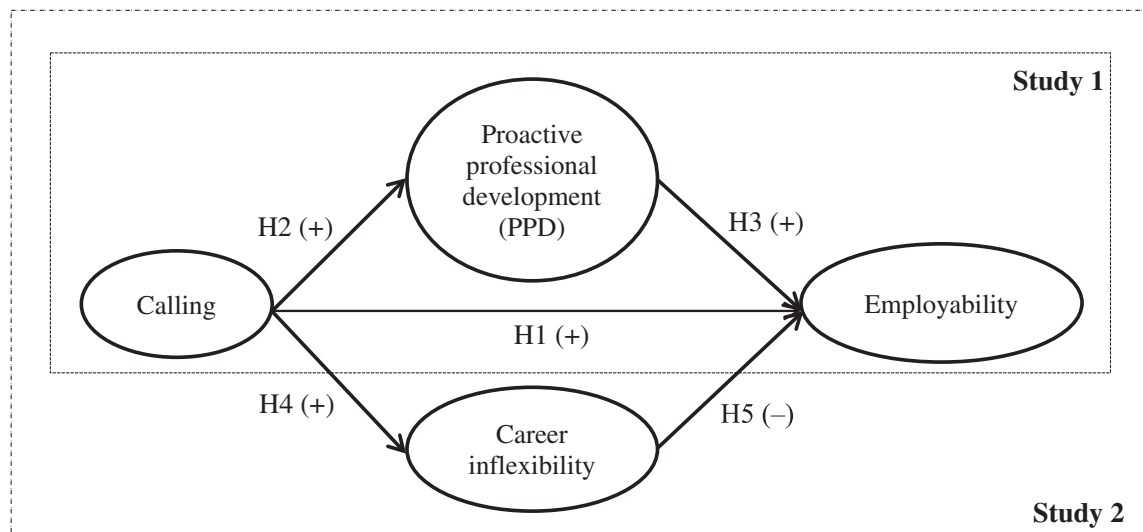


Fig. 1. Hypothesized model.

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