Construction and initial validation of the Work Context Inventory

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ABSTRACT

Although the importance of taking the work context into account is now a given when attempting to better understand behavior at work and career development, it is not always effectively considered, and a consensus regarding this context is difficult to reach. Using both qualitative and quantitative methods, the present study developed the Work Context Inventory, composed of 36 items drawn from analyses of work situations. The inventory describes 9 dimensions related to empowerment, relationships with others at work, and performance requirements. The study discusses this theoretical and empirical model by comparing it with other models that were based on different conceptual and methodological approaches. Finally, we present the practical implications of using this model, such as to support career mobility or skill development.

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1. Introduction

The many recent and ongoing changes in the world of work (Niles, Herr, & Hartung, 2002) have resulted in new demands and concerns for both businesses and employees with regard to careers (Savickas et al., 2009), mobility (Ng, Sorensen, Eby, & Feldman, 2007), and employability (Fugate, Kinicki, & Ashforth, 2004). The relationship between workers and the job market has changed, and human resources management must respond to these new realities. Career paths are marked by increasing numbers of and frequent changes in jobs and careers (Fenwick, 2013). Grant, Fried, Parker, and Frese (2010) focused on "the dramatic changes in work context" and the need not only to consider the changes themselves but also to situate and specify the organizational context. Moreover, at an individual level, these new challenges raise questions about the cross-functionality of skills, whether they are transferable to different work contexts, and the criteria used to identify differences and similarities between jobs.

It is commonplace today to stress the situated and distinctive character of action. Many authors (Engeström, 2000; Leplat, 2000a, 2000b; Suchman, 1987) have emphasized the influence of local conditions and the importance of work contexts on the way an activity is done and on the way in which it evolves. Furthermore, psychological studies of skills have also stressed that they are specific and contextualized (Barab & Plucker, 2002; Fischer, Bullock, Rotenberg, & Raya, 1993; Wagner & Sternberg, 1985). Hence, the transfer of skills may fail if the skills depend on the conditions and contexts in which they were acquired.

In these new changing work environments, taking into account the context and its influence on behavior is unavoidable; this is even truer when attempting to better understand the factors that hinder or foster career mobility. Thus, after discussing career

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mobility in context and questioning the concept of context itself, this study presents the inventory we constructed to better define its dimensions.

1.1. Career mobility and context

Although only a few decades ago it seemed natural to spend an entire career at the same company, today it is entirely acceptable for a person to experience multiple transitions over his or her career and to change positions, companies, or even professions (Chudzikowski, 2012; Eby, Butts, & Lockwood, 2003).

The literature on career construction (Savickas et al., 2009; Savickas & Porfeli, 2012) and what are termed *new careers* (Chudzikowski, 2012; Verbruggen, 2012) is abundant. Moreover, the *boundaryless career* (Arthur, 1994; Arthur, Khapova, & Wilderom, 2005; Hess, Jepsen, & Dries, 2012), which is marked by mobility (Feldman & Ng, 2007; Ng et al., 2007; Sullivan & Arthur, 2006), seems to have become the dominant model. To cope with these changes and the new opportunities or obligations they present in this world of work without boundaries, studies have emphasized the force of new demands made on employees, mainly in terms of employability (Fugate et al., 2004) and adaptability (or adapt-abilities according to Savickas & Porfeli, 2012), both of which are psychosocial constructs referring to individuals' resources for coping with the demands of a changing environment.

New careers marked by mobility, downsizing, transitions, and change imply the need to deal with new contextual, organizational, social, or environmental factors (new places, schedules, management styles, teams, interactions, etc.). This in turn requires people to reflect on the possibilities and the conditions for transferring their knowledge and skills to different contexts.

Studies on skills emphasize the importance of contextual and situational characteristics for acquiring and developing skills (Stevenson, 2002; Wagner & Sternberg, 1985). Thus, despite the success of concepts such as *generic*, *transversal*, *key* skills (Stevenson, 2003; Washer, 2007) and even *political skills* (Blickle et al., 2013), the question of how such skills can be transferred needs to be examined (Cheng & Ho, 2001; Tracey, Tannenbaum, & Kavanagh, 1995). Skill incorporates a paradox because it is specific by nature but adaptive in use. "We live in contexts, we learn in contexts, we work in contexts and no two contexts are exactly the same. Our ability to contextualise skills is as important as the skills themselves," argue Kemp and Seagraves (1995, p. 316). Nonetheless, the concept of skill includes the idea of adaptation, as the goal of a skill assessment is usually to identify the various situations in which a person may subsequently be effective. Without going to the extreme and generally unfounded position of arguing for transversal competence, it is clear that skills, under certain conditions, acquire a degree of generalization and are valid not only for the situation in which they are acquired but also for a broader range of situations (Hesketh, 1997). The underlying idea is that, strictly speaking, there is no transfer or transversal nature of a skill, but rather the possible application of a skill to new contexts that share certain key characteristics with the original context in which the skills were acquired.

It is therefore surprising that, although very present in the literature, the notion of context has remained largely absent from mobility issues in practice (Pignault & Loarer, 2008, 2011). Thus, we felt that, as a complement to analyzing work tasks and activities, the contextual characteristics of work should be studied in order to create more detailed and reliable guidelines for constructing and changing career paths.

1.2. Context: what is it?

1.2.1. Situated context and human activity

Introduced by Suchman in 1987, the notion of *situated action* has had a strong influence on the way in which researchers in the humanities and social sciences have conceived of and thought about action. Thereafter, many authors in various fields, such as cognitive psychology, ergonomic psychology, ergonomics, sociology, and cognitive anthropology (Béguin & Clot, 2004; Engeström, 2000; Nardi, 1996) have examined the influence of local circumstances and the importance of context for accomplishing work tasks and the way work is done.

Research on the immediate local context first drew on interactionist approaches, in particular Mead (1932/1980) and Schutz (1964/1987), and then extensively on ethnomethodology (Barwise, 1989; Goffman, 1961, 1964). In these different approaches, the concept of context is based on the phenomena of understanding and communication. The action of communicating agents is situated because it is oriented toward and dependent on the action of the recipient. Situated action is thus irrevocably linked to social interaction.

Later, with cognitive ethnography, Lave (1988, 1993) further emphasized the situated nature of activity and suggested the concept of *situated cognition*. Her work clearly showed that the processes learned in a particular context (e.g., school) are difficult to activate in a different context (e.g., everyday life). The concept of situated cognition places particular emphasis on using resources in the environment, in one's perception, and in space (Beach, 1988; Gay & Cole, 1967; Scribner, 1984). The situation is first seen as an organized space filled with objects; the placement of those objects and the space provide the information needed for the activity. To be effective, individuals must be able to recognize the physical, temporal, and spatial variables in their environments. Barab and Plucker (2002) took up this idea and suggested the concept of *distributed cognition*: "It is in this sense that cognition is embodied, located, or … distributed" (p. 170). Thus, *situativity theory* has become dominant in various schools of thought, although this theory has been debated (Vera & Simon, 1993).

Adopting this perspective, then, we consider work activity to be dependent on not only the various tasks to be completed but also on the characteristics of the environment and the physical, material, and social conditions. The context is not external or