



The negative effects of delays in information exchange: Looking at workplace relationships from an affective events perspective

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Delay
Information exchange
Coworker relationship
Affective events theory

ABSTRACT

Although timely exchange of information is critical to organizations, it often fails to happen. In this paper, we present a conceptual framework for understanding how delays in information exchange negatively impact employee outcomes. Using affective events theory, delays are conceptualized as workplace events. In contrast to prior delay research, we adopt a temporal perspective for studying employees' experiences during a delay and how these experiences influence interpersonal behavior. We suggest that how employees appraise and experience delays depends, critically, upon the coworker and his or her behavior during the delay. We also identify a set of situational and dispositional factors that are important for predicting when delays in information exchange are likely to undermine coworker relationships and when they are not. Throughout the paper, we develop propositions to guide research and human resource management practice.

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1. Introduction

Information sharing at work is critical to the performance of individuals, teams, and organizations (Allen & Griffeth, 1997; Eylon & Allison, 2002; Mesmer-Magnus & DeChurch, 2009; Welbourne & Ferrante, 2008). Information sharing benefits team cohesion, decision satisfaction, and knowledge integration (Mesmer-Magnus & DeChurch, 2009). Flawless and timely exchange of information is also at the heart of coordinated action (Ilgen, Hollenbeck, Johnson, & Jundt, 2004) and is critical for human resource management, such as, for example, when responding to applicants during recruitment processes (e.g., Breugh, 2008; Ma & Allen, 2009). Ironically, the critical role of information is most evident when information exchange fails, such as when information is unavailable, wrong, or late. One common and often unavoidable form of failure in information exchange involves delays (Blount & Janicik, 2001). In many situations, delays in information exchange can have substantial negative consequences for workplace outcomes, especially when the overdue information is needed before further action can be taken and when time is crucial. Delays have proximal effects on employees in that they provoke anger and frustration and cause interpersonal tensions (Rennecker & Godwin, 2005; Sarker & Sahay, 2004; Sheldon, Thomas-Hunt, & Proell, 2006). Scholars, correspondingly, have become increasingly interested in studying delays in information exchange, resulting in conceptual models and findings that have greatly improved our understanding of delays and their implications for workplace outcomes (Blount & Janicik, 2001; Munichor & Rafaeeli, 2007; Rennecker & Godwin, 2005; Sheldon et al., 2006).

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This paper aims to further the literature by presenting a theoretical model for studying delays in information exchange and their implications from a temporal perspective (Duffy, Ganster, Shaw, Johnson, & Pagon, 2006; Roe, 2008; Taylor, 1994). We draw from affective events theory (AET; Weiss & Cropanzano, 1996) to specify how a focal employee (i.e., information seeker) experiences delays in information exchange caused by a coworker (i.e., information provider). Relationships between focal employee and coworker, also referred to as coworker relationships, account for the largest proportion of workplace interactions and thus, are the most likely cause for the majority of delays (Chiaburu & Harrison, 2008; Sias, 2005). In short, the proposed model suggests that delays in information exchange undermine a sense of control in the focal employee (Greenberger & Strasser, 1986). Directly proportional to the extent to which sense of control deteriorates, negative affect increases, which, in turn, provokes counterproductive and withdrawal behaviors.

We attempt to make two contributions to the literature on information exchange. First, prior studies have assessed delays in information exchange by asking for an overall, retrospective evaluation of a delay (Groth & Gilliland, 2006; Houston, Bettencourt, & Wenger, 1998). However, such “single-shot” (Ilies & Judge, 2002, p. 1120) analyses largely ignore the possibility that delays stretch over time and exert their effects gradually (see Beal, Weiss, Barros, & MacDermid, 2005; Weiss & Beal, 2005). In contrast, this paper provides a temporal perspective on delays in order to understand the role of employees' affective experiences during delays (see Tse & Dasborough, 2008). Thereby, we emphasize the role of time, an underappreciated dimension in the study of affect at work (Ilies, Schwind, & Heller, 2007; Weiss & Beal, 2005). Second, previous research has focused on the negative affective implications of delays for individuals (Blount & Janicik, 2001; Groth & Gilliland, 2006). Much less is known, however, about the damaging effects of delays on interpersonal behavior and outcomes. There is some evidence to suggest that delays can obstruct interactions and can have damaging effects on workplace relationships (e.g., Rennecker & Godwin, 2005; Sarker & Sahay, 2004; Sheldon et al., 2006). However, systematic research on why and when delays influence workplace relationships is scarce. We endeavor to address this issue by building theory on the relational implications of delays in information exchange.

The article proceeds as follows: We define delays and outline the basic tenets of AET before introducing the model of delays in information exchange. We develop a set of propositions and outline implications for theory and for human resource management practice.

2. Conceptual background

In today's workplace, exchange of information is an essential component for all kinds of interpersonal relationships at work (Sias, 2005). Information describes easily codifiable knowledge that can be transferred without compromising its integrity (as long as the receiver knows the syntactic rules for deciphering the information) including facts, principles, insights, practices, and empirical findings (Dyer & Singh, 1998; Kogut & Zander, 1992; Moenaert & Souder, 1996). Information exchange involves the sharing of information and perspectives and helps employees to keep each other informed about work issues (Bunderson & Sutcliffe, 2002; Massey, Montoya-Weiss, & Hung, 2003). Information exchange forms an integral part of work across various jobs and industries including examples such as: Exchanging information in management and project teams (Tomlinson & Mryer, 2009); obtaining expert input necessary to develop sales proposals (Haas & Hansen, 2005); sharing updates on customer requirements in software development (Cummings, Espinosa, & Pickering, 2009); seeking and using information in journalistic work (Attfield & Dowell, 2003; Boczkowski, 2009); informing job applicants about selection decisions (Breugh, 2008); receiving laboratory results in nursing homes (Shirts et al., 2009); compiling information in crime investigations (Woolley, Gerbasi, Chabris, Kosslyn, & Hackman, 2008); and communicating information in fighting large-scale natural disasters (Comfort & Haase, 2006). In any of these examples delays may occur.

2.1. Defining delays in information exchange

Formal definitions of delays are relatively hard to find since scholars have not always described delays explicitly (e.g., Groth & Gilliland, 2006). Rennecker and Godwin (2005) suggested that delays in information exchange “impede work by blocking access to a needed resource” (p. 249). Sheldon et al. (2006) relied on expectancy violation theory (Burgoon, Le Poire, & Rosenthal, 1995) to conceptualize delays as violations of temporal expectations. Blount and Janicik (2001) used norm theory (Kahneman & Miller, 1986) to define delays more formally. The core idea of norm theory is that people focus on events that deviate from reference points. A *temporal reference point* describes the moment in which one expects a specific outcome to occur (Blount & Janicik, 2001). It is in the moment when the focal employee experiences a deviation from a temporal reference point that a delay occurs (Blount & Janicik, 2001). Unlike an objective deadline or meeting time, a temporal reference point is subjective and based on prior experiences. For example, if a coworker always exchanges information late, the focal employee may adjust his or her (temporal) expectations accordingly. The coworker, in this example, may thus exceed an objective deadline without the focal employee experiencing this as a delay.

Although drawing from different theories, authors converge on the idea that delays do not only simply indicate the absence of something, but that they also have a negative quality in themselves (see also Van Dijk, 1999). Because individuals expect outcomes to occur at specific points in time, delays constitute violations of expectations and, thus, unanticipated and unwanted events (Blount & Janicik, 2001; Sheldon et al., 2006). In building on and extending these ideas, we define delays in information exchange as negative workplace events that last from the moment that a focal employee expects to obtain information until the moment that the focal employee (knowingly) receives the information or decides to stop waiting.

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