



Reducing counterproductive work behavior through employee selection

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ABSTRACT

Counterproductive work behavior (CWB) has been a problem since organizations have hired employees. Recently, there has been increasing interest in explaining and addressing deviant behavior in the workplace. Our review of the research on CWBs shows a gap between theory development and the development of procedures to address deviant behavior. Moreover, studies in, for example, clinical psychology, have relevance for understanding CWBs, but cross-fertilization with other relevant literatures is not in evidence. We summarize the contributions of three relatively distinct lines of research. We contend that current dimensional personality theories should guide the implementation of interventions seeking to reduce CWBs. We describe validity studies that incorporate the development of employee selection procedures based on the assumption that CWBs should be anchored within a dimensional model and we present empirical results that support the utility of that model.

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Counterproductive work behavior (CWB) has been a problem since humankind has worked together to achieve communal goals. A papyrus recovered from an Egyptian tomb describes how, over 2000 years ago, workers building monuments for the nobility walked off the job to protest their lack of pay (Vernus, 2003). Of course, at that time and in that culture, strikes were a totally illegitimate and illicit activity. Although many different terms are found in the literature for CWBs – workplace deviance, organizational misbehavior, and many others, they all describe behavior that is (a) negative for the current functioning of an organization and (b) is intentional (e.g., Griffin & Lopez, 2005; Sackett, 2002). CWBs encompass an extensive range of behaviors. Gruys' dissertation (as cited in Sackett, 2002) listed 87 different CWBs which could be grouped into 11 categories. Some of these categories, such as theft of property, clearly refer to intentional acts. Other categories of behavior, such as wasting time, are negative but are more difficult to assume as voluntary.

In the present paper, we will summarize the variety of studies that characterize current thinking about CWBs. Our summary indicates that theoretical understanding of CWBs has grown rapidly in recent years, but that theoretical understanding does not inform the development of procedures for addressing CWBs, such as hiring workers who are less likely to engage in them. The latter have typically focused on preventing a specific set of behaviors, such as betraying company secrets or employee theft. Thus, their development has been largely atheoretical (or the theory has been left unexplained in the literature). We will describe an approach in which steps in the development of employee selection procedures explicitly build on theory about CWBs and are supported by empirical data. Further, we will present evidence that a model of CWBs that treats them as behaviors that are on continua with other job performance behaviors can be advantageous both in theory development and in the implementation of selection procedures.

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1. Theories of counterproductive work behavior

1.1. Intentional counterproductive work behavior

According to Griffin and Lopez (2005), the current ways of thinking about deviant behaviors in organizations have been formulated in the years since 1995. They argue that, during this period, there have been such a variety of conceptual approaches to understanding CWBs that this variety may actually be hindering progress. The multitude of behaviors identified in Gruys's dissertation (as cited in Sackett, 2002) catalogue of 87 CWBs and 11 behavioral categories indicate the difficulty of deriving a single behavior-based approach to explaining deviant behavior in the workplace. In an additional study, Gruys and Sackett (2003) started with approximately 250 counterproductive work behaviors and reduced the list to 66 CWBs. Other researchers have continued to study CWBs but have worked to develop more parsimonious models. Among the earlier studies, Hollinger's (1986) division of deviant work behaviors into property and production deviance recognized distinctions between attacks on organizational processes and attacks on material resources of the organization, but did not recognize deviant behavior with respect to persons. In contrast, Robinson and Bennett (1995) identified deviant behavior among individuals (ID) as one of the two primary categories of such behavior. Their second category was deviance toward the organization (OD). Their self-report measure – a workplace deviance scale (Bennett and Robinson, 2000) – is based on this two-factor model. According to Berry, Ones, and Sackett (2007), it has been the most used measure of CWBs in studies of workplace deviance. However, Robinson and Bennett's (1995) emphasis on behaviors may have led to the divergence in the theoretical understanding of these categories of behaviors noted by Griffin and Lopez (2005). The Bennett and Robinson (2000) CWB measure consists of items that tap the frequency of the respondent's engagement in various CWBs. It was intended to be a survey reflecting normative behavior, not a measure of constructs that explain deviant behavior. Bennett and Robinson (2000) did explore relationships between the two factors of their survey – ID and OD – and marker variables. These marker variables consisted of both measures of behavior, such as organizational citizenship behaviors (OCBs; Smith, Organ, & Near, 1983), and measures of attitudinal and motivational constructs, such as the Machiavellianism scale (Christie & Geis, 1970). The relationships were almost entirely consistent with expectations.

A number of researchers have examined the relationships of cognitive, motivational, attitudinal, and dispositional constructs with CWBs. Dilchert, Ones, Davis, and Rostow (2007) found that cognitive ability predicted CWBs, with CWBs measured as records of formally recorded incidents. The researchers split the CWB criteria into categories based on Robinson and Bennett's ID/OD distinction. The validity coefficient for cognitive ability tests predicting overall CWBs was $-.33$; when CWBs were split into dimensions, the validity coefficient was $-.36$ for organizational CWB and $-.21$ for interpersonal CWB. Dilchert et al. (2007) noted, "...individuals who were higher in cognitive ability engaged in CWB less frequently than did individuals who scored low on this trait" (p. 622). At the same time, Dilchert et al. (2007) acknowledge that "This raises the question whether the results obtained are solely due to the fact that more intelligent individuals get caught less frequently when engaging in CWB" (p. 624). They further point out that the role of intelligence in criminal behavior is a point of controversy for those who study it. In defense of the validity of their use of organizational records as a criterion, Dilchert et al. (2007) cite studies showing that lack of intelligence is not correlated with being caught more, either in juveniles or adults. These studies must be characterized by the same conundrum, however, in that more intelligent wrong-doers could be able to escape identification more readily even in these studies and could even be less likely to report their own crimes in those studies where the criterion was self-reporting. At the present time, the Dilchert et al. (2007) study is the only published investigation linking cognitive ability with actual records of CWBs of which we are aware. Thus, much more research is needed before the role of intelligence in a theory of CWBs is established.

Diefendorff and Mehta (2007) used latent variable modeling techniques to study the impact of motivational traits on CWBs. Using motivational trait constructs from Kanfer and Ackerman's (2000) research and Robinson and Bennett's (1995) ID/OD scales, they demonstrated relationships between approach and avoidance motivational traits and CWBs. Specifically, they found that personal mastery (high value of learning and goal striving) was negatively related to ID and OD and BAS sensitivity (general sensitivity to rewards) was positively related to both ID and OD. Counter to expectations, competitive excellence (desire to compete or engage in social referencing) was unrelated to both dimensions of CWBs. Avoidance motivation was positively related to OD and was predictive of ID in the presence of organizational constraints. Hershcovis et al. (2007) conducted a meta-analysis on the predictors of workplace aggression, often defined as a component of the CWB domain. Using Robinson and Bennett's framework, they divided aggression into individual and organizational dimensions. They found that both individual difference and situational factors were related to aggression.

Dalal (2005) meta-analytically investigated the antecedents of CWB and another job performance construct, organizational citizenship behavior (OCB; Organ, 1997). His results demonstrated that a number of motivational, attitudinal, and dispositional variables tend to relate to one's propensity to engage in CWBs. He found that job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and perceptions of organizational justice were negatively related to CWB. Regarding attitudinal and dispositional variables, Dalal (2005) found that both positive and negative affect were related to CWB, with negative affect displaying a slightly larger relationship to CWB. Finally, in accord with the observations of other researchers who have studied the relationship of various personality characteristics with CWB (Ones & Viswesvaran, 2003; Salgado, 2002; Sackett & DeVore, 2001), Dalal (2005) found a negative relationship between Conscientiousness and CWB. This finding was explored in further detail by Dudley, Orvis, Lebiecki, and Cortina (2006), who meta-analytically investigated the relationship of the narrow facets of Conscientiousness on CWB. Dudley et al. (2006) reported varying relationships of Conscientiousness subfacets with CWB, including dependability ($r = -.34$), cautiousness ($r = -.11$), and order ($r = -.07$). Achievement was unrelated to CWB ($r = .00$). The lack of a relationship between achievement and CWBs in Dudley et al.'s meta-analysis is consistent with Diefendorff and Mehta's (2007) results.

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