

## Developing agency through good work: Longitudinal effects of job autonomy and skill utilization on locus of control



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### ABSTRACT

An internal locus of control has benefits for individuals across multiple life domains. Nevertheless, whether it is possible to enhance an individual's internal locus of control has rarely been considered. The authors propose that the presence of job autonomy and skill utilization in work can enhance internal locus of control, both directly and indirectly via job satisfaction. Three waves of data over a four-year period from the Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia Survey (N = 3045) were analyzed. Results showed that job autonomy directly shaped internal locus of control over time, as did job satisfaction. Skill utilization did not play a role in terms of affecting locus of control, and the indirect effects of both job autonomy and skill utilization via job satisfaction were weak. This study suggests the importance of job autonomy in promoting the development of an employee's internal locus of control.

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One of the most important psychological resources that individuals can have is the belief they have control over their own lives, or an internal locus of control (LOC, Rotter, 1966). Evidence from meta-analytic studies shows that, compared to believing that one has little control over one's own life, individuals high in LOC have better mental well-being and physical health, have more favorable work experiences (e.g., perceived higher autonomy and meaningfulness at work) and fewer negative work experiences (e.g., less role conflict), and they achieve greater career success (i.e., higher salary, higher organizational level) (Cheng, Cheung, Macau, Chio, & Chan, 2013; Ng, Sorensen, & Eby, 2006; Wang, Bowling, & Eschleman, 2010). The importance of LOC in shaping human beings' life has been consistently demonstrated in clinical, social, developmental, education and work psychology for over four decades.

The concept of LOC is widely treated as an enduring dispositional attribute of an individual that is static over time. However, in fact, Rotter (1954), the originator of the concept, proposed in his social learning theory (1954) that personality represents an interaction of the individual with the external environment and thus that LOC can change as the results of change in the situation. From this point of view, an individual's LOC, or generalized expectancies of being able to influence external events via one's actions, are shaped and developed from an individual's life experiences (Rotter, 1960). The implication of this reasoning is that it should be possible for an individual to enhance their LOC if and when the environment supports personal agency. Such a developmental perspective of LOC is important because it allows for the possibility that one's level of internal LOC can change. In other words, internal LOC is not fixed, but is an attribute that can be developed, even in adulthood.

This developmental perspective on internal LOC has largely been overlooked in past studies. The limited set of studies that adopt a development view has yielded mixed findings. On the one hand, Cobb-Clark and Schurer (2013) found that life events (e.g., promoted at work or get married) did not predict change in internal LOC over a period of three years. On the other hand, longitudinal studies

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reported by Anderson (1977) and Andrisani and Nestel (1976), showed that higher firm performance and occupational status, respectively, did enhance business owners' and employees' internal LOC over a two-year period. The inconsistent findings might reflect the focus of these studies on different aspects of life events or experiences, which may require different levels of adjustment (Holmes & Rahe, 1967) and thus results in variation in the magnitude and duration of their effect on attributes like LOC. In other words, in order to change an individual's LOC, a sustained and profound environmental influence is required.

We propose that job characteristics might be an especially important environmental influence in promoting change in LOC because work is a major part of adult life, and job characteristics shape one's values, social roles and activities on a daily basis (Brousseau, 1983; Frese, 1982). Over time, experiences at work can be generalized and affect one's personality by changing one's patterns of thinking, feeling and behaving (e.g., Hudson, Roberts, & Lodi-Smith, 2012; Li, Fay, Frese, Harms, & Gao, 2014). In this study, we focus on the job characteristics of autonomy, which refers to the latitude to make decisions about day-to-day work (Hackman & Oldham, 1976), and skill utilization, which refers to using and developing skills and ability at work (O'Brien, 1982). These two job characteristics give rise to experiences of self-agency at work, which we argue will reinforce internal LOC in the long run. As we elaborate below, we propose that job autonomy and skill utilization will enhance internal LOC both directly and indirectly via job satisfaction.

### 1. Impact of job autonomy and skill utilization on internal LOC

We propose that job autonomy will enhance internal LOC directly because individuals have volitional control over the work situation, leading them to see that their choices can influence events. In other words, in autonomous jobs, individuals can make their own decisions about work activities rather than have them imposed by technology or the supervisor, and will therefore attribute the causality of work events to internal rather than external factors (Jones & Davis, 1965). High autonomy jobs also allow employees to set goals according to personal values and interests (Sheldon & Elliot, 1999), which are stable internal causes. Accordingly, we suggest that job autonomy will enhance one's tendency to make an internal attribution when explaining the causality of work events. Although this influence is situational when specific work events are interpreted, over a longer time period, we propose this attribution tendency will be consolidated as a part of one's self-schema concerning the link between one's behavior/attributes and external events (Markus, 1977), thus resulting in an increase in internal LOC.

Skill utilization focuses on individuals' sense that they are fully utilizing their skills and abilities in the job (O'Brien, 1982). Higher skill utilization will enhance internal LOC because individuals can see that they can rely on their ability and skills, rather than other unstable factors, to carry out their work. Ability and skill are internal factors: they are a part of one's self-identity that defines what an individual is capable of doing (O'Brien, 1982). Although changeable over time, ability and skill are relatively stable and do not change moment by moment. Accordingly, when individuals fully use their abilities and skills at work, they are more likely to make an internal attribution to explain the causality of positive work outcomes. When such attributions are made repeatedly over time in the course of carrying out one's work, these beliefs will be extracted as a cognitive representation of self-schemata and become an enduring dispositional characteristic. As such, skill utilization can help to increase internal LOC over a reasonably long time period.

In addition to their direct effects, job autonomy and skill utilization will also help to enhance internal LOC indirectly via their impact on job satisfaction. Job autonomy and skill utilization can lead to higher job satisfaction, an overall appraisal of work experiences that signals work success (Judge & Hurst, 2008) because they provide opportunities for growth and meaning (e.g., Hackman & Oldham, 1976) and function as resources at work that help individuals to deal effectively with job demands (Karasek, 1979). Job satisfaction could thus enhance one's internal LOC because people tend to make an internal attribution when explaining the causality of desirable outcomes (Shepperd, Malone, & Sweeny, 2008), such as having a feeling of contentment at work.

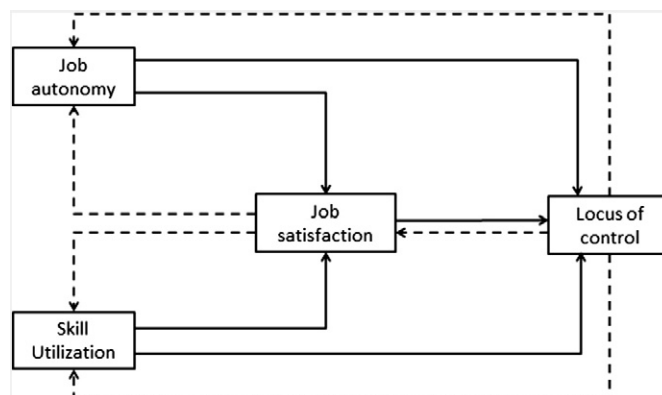


Fig. 1. The research model. Note: Effects represented by the dash lines are controlled for in order to certify the hypothesized directional impact represented by the solid lines.

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