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Adjustment processes and fit perceptions as predictors of organizational commitment and occupational commitment of young workers ☆

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ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

Task mastery and social integration have been shown to be key elements in the adjustment process of young workers during the entry phase in a new organization. We analyzed the effect of task mastery and social integration on organizational commitment and occupational commitment of young workers in a longitudinal study. Fit perceptions before organizational entry were included as predictors of the adjustment process and commitment. Data were drawn from a sample of 550 young workers in the transition from school to work before and in the first six months after organizational entry. Results show the importance of the positive change of social integration as predictor of organizational commitment and occupational commitment and additionally the importance of the pre-entry occupation–person fit on occupational commitment. The results have implications for the understanding of the organizational entry process of young workers and its dependency on the adjustment process and pre-entry fit perception.

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A successful labor market entry is important in modern societies, as it shapes the early career of individuals. Young people have to deal with multiple challenges in the transition from school to work (Stalder, 2012). One challenge for young people is to adjust rapidly to their first job, to learn how to effectively perform their tasks, and to become members of the organization and work group (Bauer & Erdogan, 2011). Task mastery and social integration are proximal results of the socialization process and have been shown to be positively linked to various work attitudes and behaviors, such as job satisfaction, low turnover intentions, and commitment (Kammeyer-Mueller & Wanberg, 2003). Social integration and the opportunity to participate in work activities are predictors of organizational commitment (Bauer & Erdogan, 2011; Filstad, 2011; Kammeyer-Mueller & Wanberg, 2003) and occupational commitment (Lee, Carswell, & Allen, 2000). Occupational commitment is as important as organizational commitment, and young workers should ecome attached to their occupation, as it is related to professional work attitudes (Cohen, 2007b). We consider, therefore, organizational commitment and occupational commitment as distinct and important outcomes of the socialization processes during organizational entry, which depend on task mastery and social integration.

Socialization processes are dynamic learning processes that unfold over time with different individual patterns of information acquisition (Ostroff & Kozlowski, 1992). Through these processes, young workers gradually become full members of the work group (Lave & Wenger, 1991). We consider changes in social integration and task mastery as important predictors of organizational commitment and occupational commitment.

Young people starting their careers in a job that fits their interests and abilities will have a better start (Schmid & Stalder, 2012; Werbel, Landau, & DeCarlo, 1996). A good fit of person and occupation is the result of intense job search behaviors and facilitates the organizational entry of an individual (Hirschi, 2011; Saks & Ashforth, 2002). We consider pre-entry fit perceptions as important predictors of organizational commitment, occupational commitment, and the adjustment process.

The aim of the present study is to test simultaneously the effects of newcomers' adjustment processes, the changes in task mastery and social integration, and the pre-entry fit perceptions on organizational commitment and occupational commitment. This study closes a research gap by distinguishing organizational commitment and occupational commitment as two distinct outcomes of the adjustment process of young workers and by testing the effect of changes in task mastery on organizational commitment and occupational commitment.

1. Organizational commitment and occupational commitment

Organizational commitment is oriented toward the organization. It is the individual's attachment to the organization and her or his identification with the organization (Meyer et al., 2012). Organizational commitment has been shown to be a predictor of increased effort, motivation, higher job satisfaction, decreased absenteeism, lower turnover, and higher retention (Freund, 2005; Kim & Mueller, 2011; Klassen & Chiu, 2011; Mathieu & Zajac, 1990; Meyer, Stanley, Herscovitch, & Topolnytsky, 2002; Morrow, 2011). Young workers' organizational commitment has also been shown to be an important predictor of dropout and the development of work satisfaction (Keller & Stalder, 2012; Vandenberghe & Ok, 2013).

Occupational commitment is the individual's affective reaction to his or her occupation. Occupational commitment is related to the development of a professional identity (Cohen, 2007b; Hauschildt & Heinemann, 2013). The first job is crucial for the development of occupational commitment, as during this first job, which is an apprenticeship, young workers are educated and trained to become professionals in their specific occupation. Most young workers will leave their first employer after two to four years, after having finished their apprenticeship, to continue their career in other organizations within the same occupational domain (Stalder & Nägele, 2011). During this first job, they will develop organizational commitment, but it is as important that they develop occupational commitment as a "meaningful focus in the life" (Lee et al., 2000, p. 799), which will guide them through their further career. In the long term, occupational commitment becomes important in domains with labor shortage, as it relates to the extent to which people feel anchored in a specific occupational domain (Major, Morganson, & Bolen, 2013); in occupations with high demands (Knudsen, Roman, & Abraham, 2013); and in domains in which occupations and apprenticeships are the organizing principle of individuals' occupational careers (INAP et al., 2012). Occupational commitment is further associated with professionalism and ethical behavior in high-risk occupations (English, 2008). Occupational commitment needs to be distinguished from career commitment or professional commitment, which have a narrower focus on an individual's career planning (Kim & Mueller, 2011; Lee et al., 2000). Occupational commitment is linked to various positive outcomes, such as lower absenteeism, higher work engagement (Freund, 2005), job performance, lower organizational turnover (Lee et al., 2000), or a lower probability to leave the occupation (Hackett & Lapierre, 2001).

Organizational commitment and occupational commitment are interrelated and mutually dependent (Cohen, 2007a), as people can be, at the same time, highly committed to their organization and their occupation (Wallace, 1993). A conflict between organizational commitment and occupational commitment can occur if, for example, professional ethical standards linked to an occupation are not respected by the employer (English, 2008).

Hypothesis 1. Organizational commitment and occupational commitment are a) distinct but b) correlated constructs.

2. Task mastery and social integration and their changes as predictors of organizational commitment and occupational commitment

Task mastery is the self-assessment of one's ability to successfully fulfill job demands (Morrison, 2002). Some studies show a relationship between task mastery and organizational commitment, whereas others do not find a relationship (Kammeyer-Mueller, Wanberg, Rubenstein, & Song, 2013). Young workers coming directly from school have to acquire task-specific skills and strategies in their first job. Only those who believe that they will succeed will engage and eventually become committed to the goals (Eccles, 2006). We think that newcomers in transition from school to work need to develop task mastery during organizational entry, which will then predict occupational commitment and organizational commitment. The lack of task mastery is a strong indicator of not being able to fulfill the demands of the occupation, which will eventually lead to a gradual alienation from that occupation (Hauschildt & Heinemann, 2013).

Perceived social integration reflects self-assessed feelings of attachment and inclusion in a work group (Morrison, 2002). Social integration indicates how well a newcomer fits in a work group (Moreland & Levine, 2001), leading to a higher commitment with the organization and the occupation. Social integration depends on group cohesiveness as an antecedent of commitment (Mathieu & Zajac, 1990). Social integration is positively associated with task mastery (Kammeyer-Mueller et al., 2013), as establishing social relationships and a high degree of social integration can help in learning organizational norms and rules and helps to acquire task-specific knowledge and skills (Nägele, 2013). Newcomers seek information and social feedback primarily from experienced workers (Ostroff & Kozlowski, 1992), which is facilitated by a positive social integration. The self-assessment of task mastery relies on feedback from colleagues and supervisors (Billett & Choy, 2013; Nägele, 2013). Therefore, we expect task mastery and social integration to be correlated.