



# Making use of professional development: Employee interests and motivational goal orientations ☆, ☆, ☆

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## ABSTRACT

Vocational interests and goal orientation (GO) are examined for their potential influences on employees' decisions to engage in professional development and to apply the knowledge and skills gained from development activities in their jobs. Specifically, professional development, in the form of continuing professional education (CE), was examined for a variety of practicing healthcare professionals ( $N = 183$ ), including physicians, nurses, and allied health professionals in the Midwest United States. Aspects of vocational interest theory (interests and congruence) and GO theory predicted CE outcomes (voluntary participation in CE beyond professional requirements and the application of CE learning at work). Further, employee GO mediated between interests and the application of CE learning at work, providing evidence of a work-specific motivational process linking interests with performance-related behavioral outcomes.

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## 1. Introduction

Recently, vocational interest theory has resurfaced in the I/O field, reigniting considerations of its relevance to the workplace with arguments that interests may have been unjustly dismissed from organizational research (Alusheff, 2012, August 15). Specifically, recent examinations have focused on both interests and congruence (i.e., extent that individuals' interests match their work environments) in predicting multiple work-related outcomes, such as training and job performance, turnover, citizenship behaviors, and counterproductive work behaviors (Nye, Su, Rounds, & Drasgow, 2012; Van Iddekinge, Putka, & Campbell, 2011; Van Iddekinge, Roth, Putka, & Lanivich, 2011).

These recent studies resulted in several conclusions regarding the importance of interests and congruence, two of which the present study sought to examine more closely. First, interests and congruence were found to be particularly relevant to job-related knowledge and skills as well as to training performance, suggesting that both of these factors may be especially important to job performance that is dependent on knowledge and skills. Therefore, interests and congruence could prove essential to professions where knowledge/skill development is crucial (Van Iddekinge, Putka et al., 2011; Van Iddekinge, Roth et al., 2011). The second conclusion of note was that congruence is more important to job performance than are interests alone, and interests may actually be more distally related to performance (Nye et al., 2012; Van Iddekinge, Roth et al., 2011).

Therefore, the present study contributes to the research literature on vocational interests in the workplace by testing these empirically-derived suggestions and recommendations. Specifically, we examined the potential effects of employees' interests

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and congruence on their attempts to develop their professional abilities, as well as their performance-related workplace application of acquired knowledge and skills. Furthermore, we studied employees in professions where their knowledge and skills are particularly important to performance: healthcare. Specialized knowledge and skills are critical in these professions, where the consequences of error can be great. This is why governments and professional associations deem it necessary that professionals' licensure/certification to practice be contingent on the initial gain and continued development of specialized skills. Finally, in addition to testing these suggestions, we also posit several original hypotheses that examine the potential for interests (apart from congruence) to predict work behavior and outcomes based on theory.

Thus, we propose that interests and congruence may predict the extent that healthcare professionals participate in professional development (in the form of continuing education; CE) and apply what they learn at work, benefitting their patients and organizations. Further, as interests may be distally related to job performance outcomes, a work-specific motivational process (i.e., goal orientation; GO) may intervene between interests and on-the-job use of knowledge and skills gained from CE.

### 1.1. Vocational interest theory

Vocational interest theory (also called RIASEC theory; [Holland, 1997](#)) posits that individual interests and work environments can be categorized along six dimensions: realistic, investigative, artistic, social, enterprising, or conventional. Each is associated with specific interests and abilities (e.g., realistic interests prefer working with practical, structured tasks). Each type is used to describe work environments by their tasks and employees by their interests.

#### 1.1.1. Interests and knowledge, skills, and abilities

Interests influence behavior by motivating the choices that individuals make regarding the amount of involvement and effort they put into certain tasks and activities ([Ackerman & Heggstad, 1997](#); [Holland, 1997](#); [Mount, Barrick, Scullen, & Rounds, 2005](#); [Sullivan & Hansen, 2004](#)). The focus of vocational interest theory has largely been on the congruence of employees' interests with their work environments. Recently, however, research examining the relationship between vocational interests and work-related knowledge and abilities, performance, and turnover intentions of U.S. soldiers suggested that interests (apart from congruence) may also be useful in predicting performance that is strongly knowledge- or skill-based ([Van Iddekinge, Putka et al., 2011](#)).

Past research supports interests relating to aptitudes and skills. Realistic interests are related to numerical, mechanical, nonverbal, and spatial reasoning, perceptual speed, form perception, and manual dexterity; investigative interests are related to abilities in critical thinking, perceptual speed, form perception, and spatial, verbal, numerical, and mechanical reasoning; artistic interests are related to abilities in music, verbal reasoning, and motor coordination; social interests are related to interpersonal and motor coordination abilities; enterprising interests are related to leadership abilities; and conventional interests are related to numerical reasoning abilities ([Ackerman, Kanfer, & Goff, 1995](#); [Lowman & Ng, 2010](#); [Lowman, Williams, & Leeman, 1985](#); [Randahl, 1991](#)).

Further evidence of the links between interests and employees' knowledge and skills can also be found in congruence research. For instance, links between congruence and general job productivity have been inconsistent or weak ([Fritzsche, Powell, & Hoffman, 1999](#); [Heesacker, Elliott, & Howe, 1988](#)), but more promising results were found when productivity included a stronger knowledge component. For instance, congruence and productivity were positively related for a group of population scientists, in terms of more active participation in professional conferences as well as more journal authorships and editorial consultantships ([Richards, 1993](#)). Knowledge is a major component of this occupation to the point that one's productivity tends to be measured by the development and publication of it. Thus, we examined learning experiences for specialized professional training, positing that professional workers' specific interests should be related to their voluntary attempts to acquire relevant skills through CE training.

#### 1.1.2. Interests and skill development

As suggested by vocational interest theory ([Ackerman & Heggstad, 1997](#); [Holland, 1997](#)), one reason that interests may be linked to the knowledge and ability aspects of performance may be the purposeful engagement in activities that reflect specific interests (activities that further develop employees' knowledge and skills). For instance, when employees' interests matched their work environments (i.e., were congruent), they perceived themselves as having more opportunities to utilize their own competencies, reported higher levels of involvement and intrinsic motivation at work, and engaged in professional skill development ([De Fruyt, 2002](#); [Dik & Hansen, 2011](#); [Gottfredson & Holland, 1990](#)).

Vocational interest theory proposes that the congruence between employees' interests and their jobs acts as a motivating factor for gaining work knowledge and competency (e.g., [Gottfredson & Holland, 1990](#); [Holland, 1997](#)). Further, proposals made by recent research (e.g., [Van Iddekinge, Roth et al., 2011](#)) also emphasize congruence to be more relevant to performance that reflects work-related learning. Therefore, we propose that the more congruent employees' interests are with their jobs, the more likely they will be to voluntarily engage in CE beyond what is professionally required and will also be more motivated to apply CE learning at work, as their work presents them with opportunities to apply their preferred competencies.

**H1.** Congruence will be positively related to participation in additional CE and to the application of CE learning at work.

Despite the emphasis on congruence in predicting work-related outcomes (such as competency development) in vocational interest theory ([Holland, 1997](#)) and research, interests (apart from congruence) may also relate to work behavior and outcomes. Interests

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