



Converting interns into regular employees: The role of intern–supervisor exchange

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ABSTRACT

Internship participation has undergone rapid expansion over the past three decades, to a point where today, many graduates and internship host-organisations regard internships as the preferred career entry point into a range of professional vocations. To date, however, there has been a dearth of studies examining factors that can influence the conversion of interns into regular employees with their host-organisations. This study bridges that gap as it involved the collection of data at three time intervals from 303 intern–supervisor dyads ($n = 606$), in order to determine the key predictors of intern conversion. Findings indicated that although intern–supervisor exchange played a strong role in influencing intern's performance, learning opportunities and satisfaction it did not play a significant role in predicting both the intern's and the supervisor's conversion intentions. Nonetheless, both intern's and supervisor's conversion intentions measured during the internship period did play a strong role in predicting actual conversion to employment at the host-organisation subsequent to the intern's graduation. Thus, this study begins to shed light on the dynamics on intern conversion, as a pivotal early juncture in an employee's career lifespan.

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1. Introduction

For university students internships are a key means of career exploration, whilst for organisations internships are an important means by which to attract and identify talented future employees. Subsequently, internship participation is becoming an increasingly prevalent pathway into a range of university graduate vocations (Gerdes, 2009; National Association of Colleges & Employers (NACE), 2013). The proliferation of internships can largely be attributed to their ability on one hand to provide host organisations with the opportunity to evaluate potential job applicants in actual workplace settings prior to formal employment, whilst on the other it also allows interns to evaluate their fit with potential employers and vocations prior to making a long-term career commitment. This unique 'try before you buy' approach to employment offered by internships means that internships are becoming a workplace context of increasing relevance to organisational and vocational researchers alike (Gomboia, Paixão, & Jesus, 2013; Zhao & Liden, 2011). However, with the exception of a recently emerging stream of literature (Hurst, Good, & Gardner, 2012; Zhao & Liden, 2011), internship research has been dominated by studies conducted from the intern's perspective, focused largely on learning outcomes (Hynie, Jensen, Johnny, Wedlock, & Phipps, 2011; Mihail, 2006), or widely on the career benefits of internship participation for interns in general terms (Cheung & Arnold, 2010; Linn, Ferguson, & Egart, 2004), rather than as a stage in an employee's career path within a particular host organisation. Therefore, further empirical investigation of internships, as a pivotal career transition point in an employee's career life span, is needed in order to provide insight into the

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predictors of intern conversion from an intern to employee after graduation, a need addressed in subsequent sections of this paper.

1.1. Intern–supervisor exchange

Although the impact of the quality of employee–supervisor relationships on workplace outcomes has been widely established, through the investigation of Leader Member Exchange (LMX) (Liden, Sparrowe, & Wayne, 1997; Sin, Nahrgang, & Morgeson, 2009), this core organisational variable has not previously been investigated within the unique employment setting of internships. This influential workplace exchange is theoretically grounded in both social exchange theory (Blau, 1964) and role theory (Kahn, Wolfe, Quinn, Snoek, & Rosenthal, 1964). Thus, LMX theory proposes that the employee–supervisor dyadic relationship is developed over time during a series of exchanges between the follower and leader, in this case, between an intern and their immediate host-organisation supervisor. To date it remains unknown how intern–supervisor exchange differs from regular employee–supervisor exchange relationships, for instance how dimensions of such exchange relationships including reciprocity, role taking and role-making shape workplace outcomes (Graen & Scandura, 1987). Presumably, the quality of exchange in the intern–supervisor relationship will be an influential determinant of conversion related outcomes, given the known importance of the supervisor's behaviour within internships (Beenen & Mrousseau, 2010; Callanan & Benzinger, 2004). However, given that the context of intern–supervisor exchange is distinct from regular LMX, in terms of both levels of commitment and relationship duration; little is known regarding how such contextual variables may impact on intern–supervisor exchange's outcomes, as discussed in the following sections.

1.1.1. Intern–supervisor exchange and intern in-role performance

High-quality LMX in regular employee–supervisor relationships is one of the most enduring predictors of employees' in-role performance (Jokisaari, 2013; Liu & Batt, 2010), which has been largely attributed to employees' preferential access to supervisory support and resources (Liden et al., 1997) and increased performance-related feedback (Dienesch & Liden, 1986; Elicker, Levy, & Hall, 2006). Concurrently, employees in high quality exchange relationships may also experience enhanced levels of mutual trust, respect and influence, as well as a sense of obligation towards their supervisor, subsequently motivating them to engage in behaviours that are associated with enhanced performance in order to fulfil their reciprocal role in the social exchange process (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995; Kacmar, Witt, Zivnuska, & Gully, 2003). These characteristics are possibly replicated within an intern–supervisor relationship, with which implications for intern performance. This relationship cannot be assumed to be automatically transferrable to internships, as for instance variables within the internship context such as job tenure is known to impact on both LMX and job performance (Ng & Feldman, 2013; Wayne, Shore, & Liden, 1997), therefore the first hypothesis tests the following relationship:

Hypothesis 1. The quality of intern–supervisor exchange relationship is positively related to an intern's in-role performance.

1.1.2. Intern–supervisor exchange and intern satisfaction

There is an established predictive link between high-quality LMX and employee satisfaction (Epitropaki & Martin, 1999; Gerstner & Day, 1997). Regular employee and intern satisfaction have been shown to be comparable phenomena in previous work (D'Abate, Youndt, & Wenzel, 2009). As with Hypothesis 1 it is presumed that interns in high quality exchange relationship will receive the benefits comparable to those associated with high quality LMX, including increased job-related communication, the differential allocation of formal and informal rewards, and access to supervisors and emotional support transfer to internships (Elicker et al., 2006; Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995), all factors which will impact favourably in intern satisfaction levels. Consequently, the second hypothesis proposes that:

Hypothesis 2. The quality of intern–supervisor exchange is positively related to internship satisfaction.

1.1.3. Intern–supervisor exchange and intern satisfaction

Interns, in common with newcomers, have limited previous experience and as a result they possess a limited number of the interpretive schemas that provide the scaffolding for effective self-directed learning in the workplace (Ashforth, 2001; Siedel, Rimmele, & Prenzel, 2005). As a consequence the organisational socialisation literature highlights the focal role the supervisor plays in enhancing newcomer learning, by providing the required support, information, resources and feedback required for the effective learning of new work roles (Feldman, 1981; Louis, 1990; Moreland & Levine, 2001). Internship supervisors can also be expected to play an especially pivotal role in intern learning. Given the short tenure of internships, intern's opportunities to learn through alternative channels, for instance, through developing relationships with co-workers or via trial-and-error, will likely be limited. It hence can be argued that high-quality LMX will provide enhanced intern learning opportunities through increased support and informational and behavioural resources provided by the supervisor (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995; Liden & Maslyn, 1998). In addition interns like regular employees in high quality exchange relationships will likely experience an increased level of interaction with their supervisors (Kramer, 1995), providing more opportunities to receive feedback and learn via modelling their supervisor's workplace behaviours (Elicker et al., 2006). Furthermore, LMX has been linked with the supervisory delegation of tasks associated with providing employees enhanced learning opportunities (Graen & Scandura,

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