



Organizational career growth and subsequent voice behavior: The role of affective commitment and gender

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ABSTRACT

Although research has established a connection between career growth and turnover intentions, there continues to be a need to study how employee career growth contributes positively to organizations. In the present research, we studied in particular how employees' organizational career growth is related to voice behavior. Employing theories of social exchange, organization-based self-esteem, and psychological attachment, we developed six hypotheses pertinent to this relationship, including the mediating role of affective organizational commitment and the moderating effect of gender. We tested our hypotheses using data from 328 employees in Mainland China over three time periods. As we hypothesized, we found positive relationships between the three dimensions of organizational career growth and subsequent voice behavior. Our results also verified that these relationships are partially mediated by affective organizational commitment and partially moderated by gender.

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Lifetime employment in the same organization was once considered normal, but job mobility and career change are becoming increasingly more common (Weng & McElroy, 2010). In this regard, Savickas (2011) notes that, whereas in the past an individual's career rested in the hands of an organization, today individuals own their own careers. In assuming greater control over their careers, however, workers need to develop skills that will ensure their employability, in effect, requiring them to be lifelong learners (Savickas, 2012). Individuals who lack career development opportunities within their current organization are left with little choice but to look to other organizations as a means for personal career growth. This suggests that employees who perceive their organization to be interested in their career growth respond positively on behalf of their organization. Indeed, recent research (Weng & McElroy, 2012; Weng, McElroy, Morrow & Liu, 2010) affirms that employees experiencing high levels of career growth within their current employment express more organizational commitment and less intention to leave. Nonetheless, the question remains as to whether organizational career growth has other positive effects on employee behavior.

In this regard, Morrison (2011) identified employee voice behavior as possessing potential to make a positive impact on organizational functioning. Morrison defines employee voice behavior as the "discretionary communication of ideas, suggestions, concerns, or opinions about work-related issues with the intent to improve organizational or unit functioning" (p. 375). As such, voice behavior is not part of an individual's prescribed role, nor is it typically recognized by the formal reward system as extra-role behavior (Van Dyne & Lepine, 1998). The degree of interest in voice behavior and its effects in organizations has increased

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markedly in the past 20 years, with over 200 manuscripts published on the topic since 1994 (Maynes & Podsakoff, 2014). In spite of the wealth of research identifying the antecedents and consequences of employee voice, however, there is an absence to date of work on the role of organizational career growth, which has also been identified as a critical factor affecting employee attitudes and behavior today.

1. Organizational career growth

Career development researchers (e.g., see Ng, Eby, Sorensen, & Feldman, 2005; Seibert, Kraimer, & Liden, 2001) have tended to focus on objective and subjective measures of career success over an individual's work life, across organizations. More recently, Weng and McElroy (2012) shifted the focus to *organizational* career growth, or the degree to which employees experience career growth within their current organization (rather than the assessment of career outcomes across their total work career). This is an important distinction insofar as career development of employees over their total work life is more unpredictable and independent of individual organizational outcomes; while organizational career growth is more regular and more closely associated with individual attitudes and behavior (Weng & Xi, 2010). Research on organizational career growth, therefore, has greater implications and is more relevant to understanding the employee–employer relationship than is career development over an employee's total working career.

Organizational career growth was originally measured using four dimensions: (1) career goal progress, (2) professional ability development, (3) promotion speed, and (4) remuneration growth (Weng et al., 2010). This multi-dimensional conceptualization implies that career growth is both a function of the employees' efforts and the organization's willingness and ability to reward such efforts. More recently, Weng and McElroy (2012) collapsed these four dimensions to three, because promotion speed and remuneration growth were highly correlated, particularly for employees in managerial positions.

2. Voice behavior

In a recent review of the literature on employee voice, Morrison (2011) identified three sets of predictors: (1) individual level factors, (2) contextual factors, and (3) supervisor behavior. Individual level antecedents include personality (Lepine & Van Dyne, 2001) and general-efficacy (Lepine & Van Dyne, 1998); individual attitudes such as job satisfaction (Tornau & Frese, 2013); perceptions of psychological safety (Detert & Burris, 2007); organizational identification (Tangirala & Ramanujam, 2008); and individual demographics including gender, ethnicity, tenure, and hierarchical position (Detert & Burris, 2007; Tangirala & Ramanujam, 2008). Research on context identified additional predictors, such as organizational culture (Dutton, Ashford, Lawrence & Miner-Rubino, 2002), group size and functioning (LePine & Van Dyne, 1998), and perceived organizational support (Ashford, Rothbard, Piderit, & Dutton, 1998). Finally, researchers identified the behavior of immediate supervisors as an important motivational cue for employee voice behavior (e.g. Liu, Zhu, & Yang, 2010). Employees are more likely to engage in voice behavior when they believe that their immediate supervisor values and is open to such behavior (Detert & Burris, 2007).

3. Hypothesis development

In this research, we aimed to relate career growth to employee voice behavior. As such, we sought to fulfill three objectives: (1) to investigate the role of organizational career growth on employee voice behavior; (2) to test whether affective organizational commitment mediates the relationship between career growth and voice behavior; and (3) to investigate whether gender differences exist in the relationship between organizational career growth and employee voice behavior. The second objective is based on previous research that has found a relationship between organizational career growth and organizational commitment (Weng et al., 2010) and between affective commitment and employee voice behavior (Tornau & Frese, 2013). Our third objective derives from the work of Morrison (2011), who identified gender as a possible individual level antecedent of voice behavior but with mixed results.

3.1. Organizational career growth and voice behavior

Three theoretically based arguments support a positive relationship between organizational career growth and voice behavior. First, social exchange theory (Blau, 1964; Homans, 1958), which states that people feel obligated to reciprocate when they receive benefits from others, provides an appropriate underlying rationale. In this case, organizations that provide their employees with opportunities for career growth create a desire on the part of those employees to give something in return. Consistent with this notion, Weng et al. (2010) and Crawshaw, Dick, and Brodbeck (2012) found that employees with better career growth opportunities exhibit higher levels of commitment to their organizations and engage in more proactive work behavior. In this respect, Morrison (2011) has argued that the motive behind engaging in voice behavior is the desire on the part of the individual to help the organization. Consequently, employees perceiving organizational support for their career growth are more apt to reciprocate and therefore to engage in voice behavior.

The second theoretical basis for our research is derived from organization-based self-esteem (OBSE). Pierce and Gardner (2004) define OBSE as “the degree to which an individual believes him/herself to be capable, significant, and worthy as an organizational member” (p. 593). Employees who experience higher levels of self-expression and success in an organization are likely to manifest higher OBSE, which serves to reinforce their positive self-image (Pierce & Gardner, 2004). In this case, it seems

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