



## Organizational career growth, affective occupational commitment and turnover intentions

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### ABSTRACT

Survey data, collected from the People's Republic of China, were used to test Weng's (2010) four facet model of career growth and to examine its effect on occupational commitment and turnover intentions. Weng conceptualized career growth as consisting of four factors: career goal progress, professional ability development, promotion speed, and remuneration growth. Results from a sample of 396 managers failed to confirm the four factor model, showing instead the need to collapse promotion speed and remuneration growth into a single facet, rewards. The three remaining dimensions of career growth were negatively related to turnover intentions and affective occupational commitment was found to partially mediate these relationships. Results are discussed in terms of using career growth to manage turnover.

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Today an individual's career is no longer tied to a single organization, as career changes and job mobility have become common phenomena (Rousseau, 1998). To be successful in one's career, employees today have to balance the relationship between their desire for career growth and their attitudes toward their current organizations. Recent research has shown career growth opportunities to be an important determinant of employee–organizational relationships. Organizations that provide mechanisms for employee career growth create a mutual investment type of relationship with their employees (Tsui, Pearce, Porter, & Tripoli, 1997), a relationship that ties career growth to important outcomes such as organizational commitment (Weng, McElroy, Morrow, & Liu, 2010). However, one would expect that any relationship between career growth and employee outcomes would depend on whether the employee is committed to pursuing a career, rather than simply holding a job, in the first place.

Rather than considering career growth in terms of the general utility of one's present job for future career outcomes (Bedeian, Kemery, & Pizzolatto, 1991), we use Weng's (2010) multidimensional conceptualization of career growth. His model suggests that career growth consists of four factors: meeting career goals, developing one's professional abilities, and receiving promotions, and compensation commensurate with those abilities. In essence, this view of career growth is an individual-level, organization specific, concept. That is, he argues that career growth is a measure of the degree to which an individual perceives that their current organization creates an environment in which the employee is able to meet his/her career-related needs and reinforces those accomplishments through promotions and compensation (Weng et al., 2010). However, this model was developed using a wide cross-section of employees, including managers, professional, and clerical across 176 organizations. One purpose of this study is to test the validity of Weng's (2010) multidimensional conceptualization of career growth using a sample limited to managers. We focus on managers because they are more likely than workers to be presented with career growth opportunities, particularly in China.

A second purpose of this study is to examine the mechanisms by which organizational career growth influences work-related outcomes. Of particular interest is how the various aspects of organizational career growth relate to the outcome of occupational commitment. Of all of the forms of work commitment, career or occupational commitment has received the least attention (Aryee

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& Tan, 1992; Goulet & Singh, 2002). Despite a growing body of research on occupational commitment (e.g. Gobeski & Beehr, 2009; Lee, Carswell, & Allen, 2000), researchers continue to call for research that will better enable us to understand this concept and its effects (Jones & McIntosh, 2010). Recently, organizational career growth has been shown to have positive effects on attitudinal variables such as organizational commitment (Weng et al., 2010), but no one has examined the relationship between career growth and affective occupational commitment. Our second aim is to address this gap in the literature.

Finally, turnover intentions are an additional outcome of interest, one shown to be related to career commitment (Mobley, Griffeth, Hand, & Meglino, 1979). The notion of met expectations or, alternatively, fulfilling the psychological contract (Rousseau, 2004), is at the heart of explaining how organizations affect individual behavior (Bedeian et al., 1991; Chang, 1999). That is, the degree to which a company satisfies the career needs of its employees affects the employee–organization relationship. One way in which organizations can meet their career needs is by providing employees with opportunities for career growth. Bedeian et al. (1991) found that career growth opportunities, or what they called the utility of the present job for one's career, were related to employees' intentions to leave. Our third objective, therefore, is to extend the work of Bedeian et al. (1991) by examining the role of employees' career growth opportunities with their current employer, as opposed to how the organization prepares employees for future career growth opportunities, on turnover intentions and test the mediating role of occupational commitment on these relationships.

## 1. Organizational career growth

Much of the research by vocational psychologists and organizational scholars on the effects of career growth focuses on objective and subjective measures of one's career success (e.g. Ng, Eby, Sorensen, & Feldman, 2005) over one's work life or career stage, and across organizations, in contrast to viewing career growth experiences from the perspective of one's experiences within their current organization. Consequently, in this paper career growth will be referred to as organizational career growth to reflect the fact that it refers to one's career growth within one's current organization, rather than one's assessment of their career growth over their total career in the workforce. Jans (1989) captured this aspect of career growth by defining the notion of career prospects as one's perceptions of the chances of development and advancement within an organization, as opposed to Bedeian et al. (1991) who used the idea of the utility of one's present job for one's career. Weng (2010) expanded on this notion of development and advancement by proposing that employee organizational career growth could be captured by four factors: career goal progress, or the degree to which one's present job is relevant to and provides opportunities for one to realize their career goals; professional ability development, or the extent to which one's present job enables them to acquire new skills and knowledge; promotion speed, an employee's perceptions of the rate and probability of being promoted; and remuneration growth, or employee perceptions of the speed, amount, and likelihood of increases in compensation. This multi-dimensional conceptualization implies that organizational career growth is both a function of the employees' own efforts in making progress toward their personal career goals and acquiring professional skills within the organization and the organization's efforts in rewarding such efforts, through promotions and salary increases. This multi-dimensional view of organizational career growth is consistent with both Porter and Steers (1973) met expectations hypothesis and the psychological contract (Rousseau, 2004).

## 2. The role of organizational career growth on occupational commitment

Career commitment is an umbrella used to describe one's commitment to a number of work related targets; namely, to one's career, one's profession and one's occupation (Cooper-Hakim & Viswesvaran, 2005). In practice, however, career, professional, and occupational commitment are often used interchangeably (Lee et al., 2000). In making the case for occupational commitment, Lee et al. (2000) do a nice job of articulating the differences among these terms. They argue that occupational commitment has the right amount of specificity regarding commitment to one's line of work. That is, one does not have to be in a profession to develop a sense of commitment to that chosen line of work. Thus, they see the term professional commitment as overly restrictive. Career commitment, on the other hand, is used by some to represent a series of jobs/occupations over the course of one's work life and is, therefore, too general. Consequently, Lee et al. (2000) opt for the term occupational commitment which they define as the "psychological link between a person and his or her occupation that is based on affective reaction to that occupation" (Lee et al., 2000, p. 800). This definition is consistent with Meyer, Allen, and Smith's (1993) notion of affective occupational commitment. Recognizing that other forms of occupational commitment exist, such as continuance and normative (Meyer et al., 1993), we focus on how affective occupational commitment affects the relationship between organizational career growth and turnover intentions.

The development of affective occupational commitment begins with occupational choice and changes based on actual experience. Early in one's career, occupational commitment is typically low, but positive job experiences that illuminate career goals, explore different careers and achieve better person-job fit help build affective occupational commitment (Goulet & Singh, 2002; Meyer et al., 1993). Therefore, the degree that an organization provides for career growth via activities that meet career goals, develop one's professional abilities, and rewards individuals for those activities should enhance their emotional attachment to their chosen occupation. This is consistent with the works of Thomas (2000) showing that meeting career goals and developing new skills are related to occupational attachment and of Darden, Hampton, and Howell (1989) showing a relationship between perceived increases in work related rewards and satisfaction with one's current occupation.

**H1.** The organizational career growth dimensions of career growth progress, professional ability development, promotion speed and remuneration growth are positively associated with affective occupational commitment.

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