

Action regulation theory and career self-management [☆]

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Abstract

Much of the responsibility for managing careers is shifting from employers to adaptive and proactive employees. A career management intervention based on action regulation theory trained 205 white collar employees to engage actively in their own career building by increasing their self-knowledge, career goal commitment, and career plan quality. As hypothesized, these three variables were positively related to subsequent career self-management behaviors, which led both directly and indirectly to career satisfaction almost 10 months after the intervention. Self-management career interventions based within an employing organization appear feasible.

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1. Introduction

With the changing nature of jobs (Bridges, 1995) and the concept of the protean career (Hall, 1996, 2004), there has been a shift of the responsibility for careers from employers to

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employees (Arnold, 2001) and a call for people to be proactive regarding their careers (Seibert, Crant, & Kraimer, 1999), which requires a high degree of personal initiative (Frese & Fay, 2001). In this paper we present a model explaining how employees can self-manage their careers within a single organization and how the organization can aid their self-management. We test the model with a quasi-experimental design using an intervention based on the concept of personal initiative (Frese & Fay, 2001). An action theory framework based on personal initiative served as a basis for developing the intervention content and process (self-regulation).

The goal of this study is to expand knowledge on the relation of individuals' control of their careers by addressing the following two issues. First, an action-theory based model attempts to explain how employees enhance control over their own careers by engaging in different activities that increase career self-management. Second, the role and importance of active career self-management for career building are clarified.

In action regulation theory, control means that individuals steer their own activities in correspondence with some goal (Frese & Zapf, 1994). Self-regulation theory argues that people's transactions with the environment "enable an individual to guide his/her goal-directed activities over time and across changing circumstances" (Karoly, 1993; see also Vohs & Baumeister, 2004). Interventions to apply self-regulation theory aim at enhanced control and self-regulation, and they have been effective for very specific, short-term employee behaviors such as job attendance (Frayne & Latham, 1987; Latham & Frayne, 1989), reduction of problematic workplace behaviors (Godat & Brigham, 1999), and sales (Frayne & Geringer, 2000). Evidence about interventions to attain more complex, longer-term goals (e.g., career building) is lacking.

Self-regulation theory is based on the idea that goals, plans and feedback are relevant parameters for regulating one's actions (Carver & Scheier, 1982; Frese & Sabini, 1985; Hacker, 1985). An action sequence (Frese & Zapf, 1994) consists of the following steps: Goals, information collection, planning, execution, and feedback. People monitor their environments, gathering information to aid in planning a course of action. As a result of goals and information, they develop plans. Executing the plan means to actively influence the environment on one's behalf, and the results are feedback regarding one's actions. Thus, personal initiative, characterized by people being self-starting, proactive and persistent in the face of barriers (Frese, Kring, Soose, & Zempel, 1996), serves as the underlying foundation for this study's intervention.

We begin by developing two models to apply action theory to career self-management. The first model (Fig. 1a) explains how a career-focused intervention based on action regulation theory increases career self-management through self-knowledge and goal commitment, which affect plan quality. The second model (Fig. 1b) explains how implementation of active career self-management behaviors affects career satisfaction, directly or through feedback variables from the organizational environment. The term feedback in action theory refers to stimuli that the person can interpret as information about the action. This can be either information on the process of action within the acting person (e.g., proprioceptive feedback), given by other people (e.g., in the sense of receiving a smile, when one has told a joke), by the objective environment (e.g., receiving a pay raise), or by a feedback intervention (when other people give me information on my actions so that I can learn from it). The models are tested in a longitudinal field quasi-experiment over a period of more than 9 months.

The study was conducted at a global technology organization headquartered in Germany that spans different industries. Its strong company culture relies on performance man-

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