Organizational embeddedness and occupational embeddedness across career stages

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Abstract

This article proposes a theoretical framework to study organizational embeddedness and occupational embeddedness. Organizational embeddedness is the totality of forces (fit, links, and sacrifices) that keep people in their current organizations, while occupational embeddedness is the totality of forces (fit, links, and sacrifices) that keep people in their current occupations. The proposed framework identifies the antecedents of these parallel processes and when and why they can diverge. It also highlights the role that individuals' career stages play in the embedding process. The article concludes with a discussion of avenues for future research on job turnover and occupation change and implications for management practice.
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Keywords: Job stability; Job embeddedness; Organizational embeddedness; Job turnover; Career stability; Occupational embeddedness; Organizational change

1. Introduction

Particularly since the mass layoffs of the 1970s, the careers literature has paid a great deal of attention to employees' job mobility (Arthur & Rousseau, 1996; Ng, Eby, Sorensen, & Feldman, 2005; Sullivan, 1999). However, over the past several years, an interesting alternative question has emerged: Why do people stay in their organizations and occupa-

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tions even when other opportunities are available elsewhere? Beginning originally with the research on *job embeddedness*, scholars have been paying more and more attention to issues of job stability (Mitchell, Holtom, Lee, Sablynski, & Erez, 2001).

Interest in *occupational embeddedness* has increased among careers researchers as well (King, Burke, & Pemberton, 2005). Just as individuals can become embedded in their organizations, individuals can become embedded in their occupations, too (Feldman, 2002a). For example, many individuals are still predisposed to stay the course in hopes of greater job security and employment stability (Ng, Butts, Vandenberg, Dejoy, & Wilson, 2006; Schmidt, 1999; White, Hill, Mills, & Smeaton, 2004).

A greater understanding of employee embeddedness is timely and important for several reasons. First, the construct of occupational embeddedness can shed light on how an individual's career development might explain job turnover above and beyond immediate situational factors (Griffeth, Hom, & Gaertner, 2000; Steel, 2002).

Second, employee embeddedness is relevant to organizational staffing and retention policies. In numerous cases, organizations have operated on the assumption that high (or low) job turnover is due to largely intra-organizational factors and, therefore, can be addressed by more effective staffing and retention programs (Greenhaus, Callanan, & Godshalk, 2000; Rousseau, 2004). However, sometimes low turnover may be due to embeddedness in a particular career path rather than to the nature of a particular organization's environment. On the other hand, high turnover may be a function of low "sunk costs" in an occupation rather than of organizational "errors" in managing personnel. Untangling the effects of job turnover and occupational change, then, can provide organizations with better guidance about what actions are helpful, unhelpful, or irrelevant in stemming turnover.

Third, the degree of employee embeddedness can affect the transfer of knowledge, innovation, and technology across organizational boundaries. While employee mobility may have harmful effects on group functioning and organizational performance, a lack of employee mobility might also slow down the rate of diffusion of new knowledge across organizational and industry boundaries (Saxenian, 1996).

The purpose of this article, then, is to provide an integration and extension of the embeddedness literature. The central thesis of the current article is that organizational embeddedness and occupational embeddedness develop in largely parallel fashion, yet there are still some factors that uniquely promote either organizational embeddedness or occupational embeddedness. We also suggest that the factors that result in organizational embeddedness and occupational embeddedness vary across the establishment, maintenance, and disengagement stages of careers. Super's (1957, 1984) life-span, life-space model acts as the theoretical guide for explaining this embeddedness process.

2. Definitional issues

2.1. Organizational embeddedness

To explain why people do not change organizations even when opportunities exist, Mitchell et al. (2001) proposed a new construct called *job embeddedness*. It is important to note that because embeddedness in a job essentially embeds the individual in the organization, too, job embeddedness also implies organizational embeddedness. On the contrary, organizational embeddedness does not necessarily imply job embeddedness