



## The interactive effect of leader–member exchange and electronic communication on employee psychological empowerment and work outcomes

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### ABSTRACT

We advance understanding of the role that leaders play in promoting psychological empowerment and positive work outcomes (job satisfaction, organizational commitment and job performance) for employees who engage in a high degree of electronic communication in their job. By integrating leader–member exchange (LMX) theory and theories of electronic communication, we build and test a mediated moderation model in which employees' degree of electronic communication in their job amplifies the positive relationship that LMX has to psychological empowerment and subsequent employee work outcomes. Based on a sample of 353 early-career professionals employed in a range of different types of organizations, we found general support for the hypothesized model. We discuss the study's theoretical and practical implications for leading employees in electronically-enabled work environments.

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The growth in virtual work arrangements and the increased availability of information and communication technologies (ICT) have led to an increase in employees' use of electronic rather than face-to-face communication for interactions with others in their job (Kirkman, Gibson, & Kim, 2012; Martins, Gilson, & Maynard, 2004; WorldatWork, 2006). For example, given the widespread use of telecommuting (WorldatWork, 2006), many employees either work away from a central office or interact with others who are not in the office. In addition, recent estimates show that well over half of professional employees, regardless of their work location, now participate in at least one virtual team (Martins et al., 2004), using electronic communication to interact with distributed team members. Even when coworkers are in the same office, research has shown that at distances of a few meters between communicating parties (e.g., on different floors of the same building), there is a drastic reduction in face-to-face communication and an increased use of electronic communication (for a review, see Axtell, Fleck, & Turner, 2004). Given the proliferation of “electronically-enabled” (Gibson, Gibbs, Stanko, Tesluk, & Cohen, 2011, p. 1481) work activity, it is important that leaders understand their role in promoting effective work outcomes for their employees who operate to a large degree in this mode.

In particular, researchers have cautioned that the challenges associated with using a high degree of electronic communication and the attendant lack of face-to-face interaction might impede the development of positive employee psychological states, and ultimately important work outcomes (Gibson et al., 2011; Humphrey, Narhgang, & Morgeson, 2007). These challenges include

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more difficulty establishing a sense of connectedness with others (Gibson & Gibbs, 2006; Kirkman, Rosen, Gibson, Tesluk, & McPherson, 2002; Wiesenfeld, Raghuram, & Garud, 1999), more problems establishing shared understanding with communication partners (Cramton, 2001; Hinds & Weisband, 2003), and greater ambiguity and uncertainty in communications (Greenberg, Ashton-James, & Ashkanasy, 2007; Tangirala & Alge, 2006). Given these challenges, it is important to understand how leaders can promote positive employee psychological states, and ultimately positive work attitudes and performance in electronic work environments. Yet, research in this area has been lacking. Accordingly, in this study, we examine the role of leadership in promoting psychological empowerment in employees that use electronic communication to varying degrees in their job. Psychological empowerment is an important psychological state that reflects intrinsic task motivation (Spreitzer, 1995) and has been shown to impact employee attitudes and performance (for a review, see Seibert, Wang, & Courtright, 2011).

One promising theory of leadership related to fostering employee psychological empowerment is leader–member exchange (LMX) theory (Dulebohn, Bommer, Liden, Brouer, & Ferris, 2012; Seibert et al., 2011; Spreitzer, 2008). Leader–member exchange refers to the quality of the relationship between an employee and his or her supervisor (Dienesch & Liden, 1986; Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995). There is a growing body of empirical evidence to show that high quality LMX facilitates the development of psychological empowerment (Dulebohn et al., 2012; Seibert et al., 2011). We extend LMX theory by integrating theoretical perspectives related to electronic communication (DeSanctis & Poole, 1994; Spears & Lea, 1992; Walther, 1996; Wiesenfeld et al., 1999) in order to examine employees' degree of electronic communication as an important moderator of the relationship that LMX has to psychological empowerment and subsequent employee work outcomes (job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and job performance).

We also extend research that has demonstrated the varying effects of leadership dependent on different characteristics of virtual work environments (Gajendran & Joshi, 2012; Golden & Veiga, 2008; Hoch & Kozlowski, 2012; Joshi, Lazarova, & Liao, 2009; Kahai, Huang, & Jestic, 2012; Purvanova & Bono, 2009). Past research examining leadership in conjunction with the use of electronic media has primarily focused on transformational and transactional leadership effects (e.g., Huang, Kahai, & Jestic, 2010; Kahai et al., 2012; Purvanova & Bono, 2009). In addition, this current research extends past research that has examined LMX relative to virtual work environments (Gajendran & Joshi, 2012; Golden & Veiga, 2008; Hoch & Kozlowski, 2012) in two distinct ways. First, past research has focused primarily on employees' work location. For example, Golden and Veiga (2008) showed that employees' work location (in or away from the office) moderated the relationship between LMX and employee work outcomes. However, as noted earlier, there is research to show that employees might use electronic communication to a high degree even when working in an office. In other words, different characteristics of virtual work environments (e.g., physical location, use of electronic communication) tend to operate independently and have differential effects on work outcomes based on different theoretical rationales (Gibson & Gibbs, 2006). Hence, they warrant separate investigation. Accordingly, Golden and Veiga (2008) called for research that specifically examines the effects of LMX in conjunction with the use of electronic communication. Second, past research has not considered impacts to employee psychological states, further prompting calls for research that examines the psychological processes through which LMX links to employee work outcomes in virtual work environments (Gajendran & Joshi, 2012).

In summary, we extend LMX theory into electronically-enabled work contexts by highlighting degree of electronic communication as a moderator of the LMX-psychological empowerment relationship. Further, as shown in Fig. 1, we propose a mediated moderation model (Preacher, Rucker, & Hayes, 2007) where the interactive effect of LMX and degree of electronic communication influences important work outcomes (job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and job performance) through psychological empowerment. Past research related to LMX in the context of virtual work has used a single organization sample (e.g., Gajendran & Joshi, 2012; Golden & Veiga, 2008); and, more generally, research focused on leadership in conjunction with electronic communication has typically used ad hoc teams in the laboratory (Kirkman et al., 2012). In this study, we test the theoretical model using a sample of employees from different organizations and industries.

## 1. Theory and hypotheses

In this section we develop a theoretical model (Fig. 1) in which degree of electronic communication moderates the relationship that LMX has on psychological empowerment and, ultimately, employee work outcomes (job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and

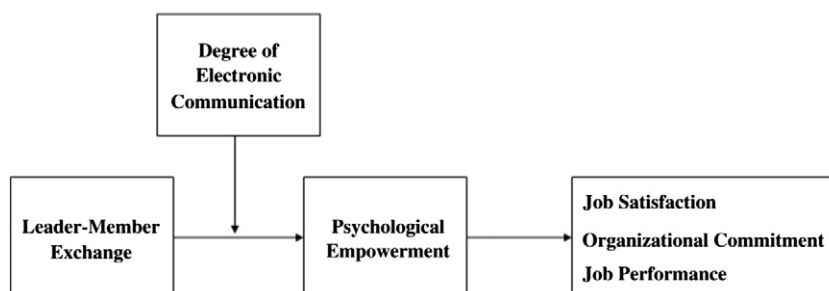


Fig. 1. Theoretical model.

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