Individual and contextual factors: An interactionist approach to understanding employee self-development

Karin A. Orvis *, Gregory P. Leffler

Old Dominion University, USA

ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

While prior research has identified several individual characteristics and contextual factors influential on an employee's quantity of self-development participation, no research has examined multiplicative effects among these factors. This study investigated person-situation interactions among five individual characteristics (e.g., openness to experience) and the contextual factor of workplace support for self-development. This study also sought to investigate the link between proactive personality and self-development participation, a promising individual characteristic that has received little attention in the self-development literature. Data collected from 136 employees demonstrates significant interactions between workplace support with learning goal orientation, openness to experience, and conscientiousness. As hypothesized, workplace support is more strongly, positively linked to quantity of self-development participation for employees lower in these traits. In contrast, the provision of external support is rather inconsequential for those high in these traits, as these employees demonstrate an internal propensity to engage in voluntary development regardless of the support available. Regarding proactive personality, a significant positive relationship was observed with self-development quantity. Further, although the expected interaction between proactive personality and workplace support did not reach statistical significance ($p = .056$), it was in the hypothesized direction.

© 2011 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction

Organizations are facing increased pressure to reduce the time and financial costs associated with required organizational training programs (O'Toole & Lawler, 2006). Accordingly, increased attention is being directed toward self-development as a means to supplement these required programs (Orvis & Ratwani, 2010). Self-development is defined as the total of all deliberate activities, not formally required by the organization, that an employee undertakes to gain and retain job knowledge/skills (Tough, 1978). This can include activities such as reading articles/magazines, attending a conference, and taking a certification course. The distinguishing factor that makes a development activity "self-development" is its voluntary nature.

Financially, self-development can be more economical for an organization than required training programs because such activities can be self-initiated, self-funded, and completed outside of an employee's regular workday (Ellinger, 2004). Self-development is also associated with other positive outcomes, such as employee job satisfaction and organizational commitment (Blau et al., 2008). Given the utility of self-development, a substantial amount of research has examined the influence of employee individual characteristics and contextual factors on the frequency/quantity of self-development performed (Hurtz & Williams, 2009; Maurer & Tarulli, 1994; Maurer, Weiss, & Barbeite, 2003; Tharenou, 2001). This research has investigated individual characteristics such as personality traits (Major, Turner, & Fletcher, 2006), and contextual factors such as workplace support for development (Birdi, Allan, & Warr, 1997; Maurer, Lippstreu, & Judge, 2008). This prior research has contributed substantially by identifying relevant main effects of individual characteristics and contextual factors.

Yet, the theory of person-situation interaction suggests that an individual may behave differently depending on the situational context (Mischel & Shoda, 1995). While prior research has found multiplicative effects between workplace support and malleable employee attitudes (e.g., intentions to develop) on self-development participation (i.e., Boyce, Zaccaro, & Wisecarver, 2010; Tharenou, 2001), no self-development research has examined multiplicative effects involving more stable individual characteristics (e.g., personality). Drawing from the broader training literature (Gully, Payne, Koles, & Whitman, 2002; Orvis, Brusso, Wasserman, & Fisher, 2011), however, there is evidence for such person-situation interactions influencing individuals' learning/development outcomes.

* Corresponding author. Address: 250 Mills Godwin Building, Psychology Department, Old Dominion University, Norfolk, VA 23529, USA. Tel.: +1 757 683 4215; fax: +1 757 683 5087.

E-mail address: korvis@odu.edu (K.A. Orvis).

Accordingly, the primary purpose of this study is to examine whether the contextual factor of workplace support for self-development interacts with an employee's individual characteristics to influence self-development. Specifically, it may be that some employees require support from their workplace to self-develop and engage in little to no self-development if this particular context is not present. The ability to identify whether certain types of employees require more extensive workplace support may help an organization create initiatives designed to increase self-development across *all* employees.

A second contribution of this study is the specification of potential main and multiplicative effects of the emerging trait of proactive personality. To date, the influence of this individual characteristic has only been examined in one prior self-development study (see Major et al., 2006). Proactive personality should be important to self-development; its components are relevant to initiative-taking with respect to opportunities and propensity for completing discretionary job behaviors, both of which are likely to influence participation in self-directed learning (Crant, 1996).

1.1. Workplace support and self-development participation

Workplace support for self-development reflects an employee's perceptions regarding the degree to which his/her organization and supervisor are supportive of voluntary employee learning/development (Maurer & Tarulli, 1994). Organizationally-based support reflects the organizational resources devoted to self-development and the organizational culture for learning. Organizations can increase perceptions of support by providing information on available self-development activities, offering in-house activities, and implementing other practices that recognize/reward self-development. Examples of supervisor-based support include: explaining the value of self-development, identifying/recommending activities to subordinates, and demonstrating interest in activities subordinates perform (Orvis & Ratwani, 2010).

Workplace support and self-development quantity have been positively linked throughout the literature (Birdi et al., 1997; Maurer et al., 2003; Maurer et al., 2008). A work environment that promotes, rewards, and offers resources/assistance for self-development communicates that it is a valued activity – one that may increase employees' current standing and potential for organizational advancement. In turn, this influences subsequent self-development participation (Tharenou, 2001).

1.2. Individual characteristics and self-development participation

The individual characteristics examined as moderators in this study were chosen based on prior self-development research; these traits have received the most empirical attention and demonstrated the largest associations with self-development participation. Specifically, learning goal orientation, self-efficacy for self-development, openness to experience, and conscientiousness have been consistently positively correlated to self-development (Blau et al., 2008; Boyce et al., 2010; Hurtz & Williams, 2009; Major et al., 2006; Maurer et al., 2003; Maurer et al., 2008). Further, while little research has examined the link between proactive personality and self-development (one exception is Major et al., 2006), theoretically there is a strong reason to believe such a relationship exists. Accordingly, the remainder of this section discusses the hypothesized interactions for these five individual characteristics and the situational factor of workplace support.

1.2.1. Learning goal orientation

Learning goal orientation (LGO) reflects "an individual's desire to develop his/her self by acquiring new skills, mastering new situations, and improving one's competence" (VandeWalle, 2001,

p. 165). Employees with high LGO possess a high motivation to learn (Orvis, Fisher, & Wasserman, 2009) and aspirations/initiative to advance in their job/career (Godshalk & Sosik, 2003). Further, they believe that their knowledge/skills are malleable and can be improved with effort (VandeWalle, 2001). Accordingly, it is likely that employees higher in LGO will participate in self-development for learning and personal growth, regardless of the level of workplace support they receive. In contrast, low LGO employees are less intrinsically motivated to acquire new skills or improve their competence. Thus, it may be more important that organizations and supervisors offer support and prompting for self-development to these employees so they realize the potential personal and organizational benefits associated with self-development participation.

Hypothesis 1: LGO and workplace support for self-development will interact such that the relationship between workplace support and self-development quantity will be stronger as LGO decreases.

1.2.2. Self-efficacy for self-development

Self-efficacy for self-development reflects an individual's belief that he/she has the capability to improve his/her job knowledge/skills by engaging in development activities (Maurer et al., 2003). An employee with low self-efficacy for self-development may participate in little to no self-development because they believe that they cannot increase their job knowledge/skills by doing so (Maurer et al., 2003); and, as such, they may feel self-development participation is fruitless at best. For such an employee, workplace support is likely to be quite important in fostering a sense of self-efficacy at least to a level that will encourage the individual to begin any self-development activity (Maurer, 2001). Conversely, self-efficacious employees believe that they are capable of achieving personal growth in knowledge/skills through self-development. As such, they will be more likely to engage in these activities (to achieve personal growth) regardless of the level of workplace support received.

Hypothesis 2: Self-efficacy for self-development and workplace support will interact such that the relationship between workplace support and self-development quantity will be stronger as self-efficacy decreases.

1.2.3. Openness to experience

Openness to experience encompasses personal characteristics such as an intellectual curiosity and preference for variety (Costa & McCrae, 1992; Goldberg, 1993). Employees higher in openness are generally receptive to learning new things (McCrae, 1987). Additionally, they are likely to be creative in the tasks they choose to perform and more willing to try things that are less traditional (McCrae, 1987). Therefore, it is likely that employees higher in openness will choose to participate in self-development for learning and personal growth (Maurer et al., 2008). In contrast, employees lower in openness are less intellectually curious. These individuals are less intrinsically motivated to learn new job skills; and, accordingly, will be less interested in self-development. Therefore, they may require support and prompting to see the value of self-development and be willing to invest time into this voluntary behavior.

Hypothesis 3: Openness to experience and workplace support will interact such that the relationship between workplace support and self-development quantity will be stronger as openness decreases.

1.2.4. Conscientiousness

Conscientiousness is defined as a "degree of organization, persistence, and motivation in goal-directed behavior" (Costa & McCrae, 1985, p. 2). Conscientious individuals have a high need for achievement, as well as set difficult goals and work persistently to reach them (Barrick, Mount, & Strauss, 1993). In a workplace