

Brief Report

# Self-determined work motivation predicts job outcomes, but what predicts self-determined work motivation?

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Available online 29 February 2008

## Abstract

Self-determined work motivation predicts important job outcomes, such as job satisfaction [Richer, S. F., Blanchard, C., & Vallerand, R. J. (2002). A motivational model of work turnover. *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, 32, 2089–2113], but what predicts self-determined work motivation is less fully understood. We tested general causality orientation—specifically autonomy and control orientation—as a predictor of self-determined work motivation, which in turn was expected to predict job satisfaction and identification commitment as job outcomes. Regression analyses confirmed our hypotheses such that autonomy orientation predicted job outcomes via increased self-determined work motivation. Control orientation predicted self-determined work motivation but did not affect either of the two job outcomes. Findings are discussed with respect to the importance of individual differences in understanding job outcomes.

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**Keywords:** Causality orientation; Self-determination; Work motivation; Job satisfaction; Identification commitment

## 1. Introduction

Employees' self-determination is an important issue in organizations (Gagné & Deci, 2005). Self-determined employees feel more committed to their organizations (Gagné & Koestner, 2002) and report fewer turnover intentions (Richer, Blanchard, & Vallerand, 2002) and physical symptoms (Otis & Pelletier, 2005). But what explains why some employees engage in their work for self-determined reasons (e.g., because my work is important to me), whereas others engage in their work for external reasons (e.g., because I might get fired if I didn't)? In the current study, we investigate the role of general causality orientation (Deci & Ryan, 1985b) in predicting self-determined work motivation. Further, based on evidence linking causality orientation to job outcomes (Baard, Deci, & Ryan, 2004) and consistent with earlier theorizing (Gagné & Deci, 2005), we test a model whereby self-determination mediates the relation between causality orientation and job-related outcomes.

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Drawing from self-determination theory (SDT; Deci & Ryan, 1985a), we define self-determination as the experience of engaging in behaviors for autonomous reasons that are fully endorsed by the self, as opposed to reasons that feel pressured or coerced. Self-determination is inherent in activities that are intrinsically motivated—i.e., undertaken for their own sake (Deci & Ryan, 1985a). However, reasons for engagement in extrinsically motivated activities—those that, like work, are undertaken as a means to some end—can vary along a continuum representing degrees of self-determination. These degrees of self-determination are also conceptualized as the extent to which individuals have internalized the value of an activity and made it their own. Specifically, according to SDT (Ryan & Deci, 2000), employees who engage in their work for *external* reasons (e.g., salary, to avoid being fired) are non-self-determined and have not internalized the value for the work. They experience their behavior not as fully self-endorsed, but rather, as coerced by outside inducements. Employees who do their work for *introjected* reasons (e.g., to avoid guilt, shame, or negative self-evaluation) are minimally self-determined—they feel similarly coerced, but in this case by a self-imposed sense of “should.” Self-determined employees, by contrast, engage in their work for *identified* or *integrated* reasons (e.g., a sense of personal importance or valuing, consistent with other personally important values). They wholly and freely endorse their behavior, without feelings of pressure or coercion, and have fully internalized the value for the work.

Employees' self-determination has been linked to positive job outcomes. For example, police officers with higher levels of self-determined work motivation reported greater intentions to remain in their jobs as long as they could before retirement (Otis & Pelletier, 2005). They were also less likely to report daily hassles, or minor events that served as a source of irritation to the individual. Fewer daily hassles, in turn, predicted lower levels of physical symptoms. In another study, self-determined work motivation was associated with a greater level of work satisfaction and lower level of emotional exhaustion, and these in turn were differentially related to turnover intentions (Richer et al., 2002). Thus, self-determined work motivation predicts desirable job outcomes. What, though, predicts self-determined work motivation?

Substantial evidence supports the role of the social environment in predicting self-determination at work (Baard et al., 2004), but the role of individual differences has received considerably less attention, despite evidence and theory suggesting their importance (Black & Deci, 2000). Thus, our purpose in the current study was specifically to view the individual as an important selector and filter of surrounding environments, and therefore to focus on within-individual processes that might affect job outcomes. Following Gagné and Deci's (2005) call for examination of general causality orientation as a particularly key individual difference, we test its role in predicting self-determination and ultimately job outcomes.

General causality orientation (GCO; Deci & Ryan, 1985b) is an individual difference variable that refers to people's tendency to orient toward particular kinds of social or environmental inputs, and particular interpretations of those inputs. Causality orientation is a stable disposition over time and across domains. It thus differs from self-determination, which is domain-specific and can be influenced by both individual differences and contextual factors. Two types of causality orientations are relevant in the workplace: autonomy orientation and control orientation. Autonomously-oriented individuals tend to look for opportunities that provide self-determination, to interpret events as autonomy-supportive, and to organize their behaviors based on intrinsic interest. By contrast, control-oriented individuals tend to organize their behaviors based on deadlines, rewards, and surveillance; to interpret events as controlling; and to be motivated by extrinsic rewards. Although individuals' causality orientation and their domain-specific levels of self-determination are conceptually distinct (i.e., autonomously oriented individuals can engage in particular activities for non-self-determined reasons; control oriented individuals can engage in particular activities for self-determined reasons), we hypothesize that in the work domain, autonomy orientation will predict more self-determined reasons for engaging in work, while control orientation will predict less self-determined reasons.

Beyond the predicted association between GCO and self-determined work motivation, some emerging evidence suggests that GCO is itself associated with job outcomes. For example, autonomy orientation has been positively associated with job performance and psychological adjustment (Baard et al., 2004). Similar findings have obtained in non-work domains, as well (Black & Deci, 2000). Based on this pattern of evidence and earlier theorizing (Gagné & Deci, 2005), we propose a mediational model whereby GCO predicts self-determined work motivation, which in turn predicts job outcomes.

Regarding specific job outcomes, we focus on job satisfaction and identification commitment, both of which count among the broad indices of the health of an organization, and have been linked with positive

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