The impact of individual goal orientation and perceptions of support for employee development on work-related outcomes

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Abstract

In this paper we examine the contributions of dispositional goal orientation and organisational support for employee development to a range of work-related outcome variables including intentions to participate in future development, job satisfaction, organisational commitment, and learning transfer. Individual-level analyses using data collected from 1278 full-time employees engaged in tertiary study indicate that perceptions of organisational support for employee development are associated with the positive transfer of tertiary learning to the job and decreased continuance commitment. Moreover, employee perceptions of a supportive work environment for development were also found to be positively related to job satisfaction, affective organisational commitment, and intentions to participate in future work-related development activities. Employee learning orientation was positively related to self-reported transfer of learning and a performance avoid orientation was associated with higher continuance commitment scores. Contrary to our expectations regression analyses provided scant support for any interaction effects. Overall, the research points to the significant independent contribution of both individual (trait goal orientation) and situational factors (perceptions of support for employee development) for the prediction of valued work-related outcomes. However, the results suggest that a positive climate for employee development is associated with a wider range of outcomes and is generally more influential than employee goal orientation.

Introduction

Commentators and researchers have noted how learning is increasingly salient for many employees and organisations. Rapid technological and organisational change coupled with greater emphasis on interpersonal skills, flexibility, adaptability, innovation and problem solving has led to a situation where contemporary work roles are broader, more demanding and complex. More so than ever before employees now have to be prepared to adjust to new situations and to learn new skills (Colquitt, LePine, & Noe, 2000). Traditionally research on employee development has concentrated on delineating instructional methods and settings that foster maximal learning (Colquitt et al., 2000). However, over the past two decades there has been growing interest in how individual attributes and work environment factors might impact on the effectiveness of development initiatives. In this paper we examine the contribution of two such factors, employee goal orientation and perceptions of investment in employee development, to a range of development and work-related outcomes including intentions to participate in future training, job satisfaction, organisational commitment, and learning transfer.

Learning Climate – Perceived Investment in Employee Development

Climate in organisational settings has been extensively researched and has been linked with many desirable organisational outcomes. Climate in this context refers to
employees’ perceptions of their workplace environment – at the individual level this is referred to as psychological climate, and the term organisational climate reflects an aggregate of these perceptions (Parker et al., 2003). Work outcomes such as job performance, organizational performance, motivation, employee wellbeing, withdrawal, job satisfaction and organisational commitment have all been shown to have positive relationships with climate (Carr, Schmidt, Ford & DeShon, 2003; Parker et al., 2003). In this study we use perceived investment in employee development (PIED) as a measure of learning climate. PIED is a construct reflecting an employee’s perception of how supportive an organization is of skill development, employability and career management (Lee & Bruvold, 2003).

In the research literature surrounding individual engagement in learning and development, climate variables have mostly been shown to have positive relationships with intentions to participate in learning opportunities. For example, in a meta-analysis of antecedents to training motivation, Colquitt et al. (2000) found that supervisor support, peer support and a positive transfer climate were all moderately related to motivation to learn, and Maurer and Tarulli (1994) found that perceived environmental factors predicted both past participation and intentions for future participation – specifically, an organisational emphasis on learning and development predicted interest and intentions for future participation. In her study of organisational, job, and personal predictors of employee participation in training, Tharenou (1997) showed that of the organisational factors impacting on participation in training, career encouragement was most important, and in fact more important than job, demographic or attitude factors. Given these results, and especially the emphasis on career aspects in the PIED scale, we propose the following hypothesis:

**Hypothesis 1:** PIED will be positively related to intentions to participate in future learning opportunities.

Climate has also been associated with transfer of acquired skills and knowledge to performance on the job. In the meta-analysis by Colquitt et al. (2000), the same variables that moderately related to motivation to learn were all strongly related to transfer (supervisor support, peer support and a positive transfer climate). Although the relationship between transfer and learning climate as a whole has received little attention, there has been a considerable amount of research investigating transfer of training and transfer climate. Studies on the role of transfer climate have found positive relationships with transfer of training (Tracey, Tannenbaum & Kavanagh, 1995). Tracey et al. (1995), investigating both transfer climate and learning culture, comment “Behaviors that send a message that learning is important and valued, and cues that suggest the organization is innovative and competitive, appear to encourage the application of newly trained behaviors.” (p. 249). Given the relative dearth of research into the learning climate-transfer relationship, and based on the findings of transfer climate studies, we propose the following hypothesis:

**Hypothesis 2:** PIED will be positively related to transfer of training.

Both job satisfaction and organisational commitment have been positively associated with climate (Carr et al., 2003; Parker et al., 2003). In the small number of studies that have investigated this relationship with a specific climate for learning, these positive relationships have held (Mikkelsen et al., 2000; Lee & Bruvold, 2003). Recent reviews of the antecedents and consequences of organizational commitment
(Meyer et al., 2002) and POS (Rhoades & Eisenberger, 2002) also provide a basis for hypothesising links between these constructs. More specifically, both Meyer et al. and Rhoades and Eisenberger report a strong positive correlation for organizational support and affective commitment and a modest negative correlation for organizational support and continuance commitment. In addition to this, we also suggest that a positive relationship between learning climate and continuance commitment can be argued logically. A learning climate is likely to lead to employees undertaking development opportunities, and it has been suggested that expanding and improving skills, knowledge and abilities enhances employability (Forrier & Sels, 2003). Where employees feel that they are employable in the external labour market, their feelings of continuance commitment are likely to be lower, as their perceptions of cost of leaving the organisation will be diminished. Accordingly, we propose the following hypotheses:

- **Hypothesis 3:** PIED will be positively related to job satisfaction
- **Hypothesis 4a:** PIED will be positively related to affective commitment
- **Hypothesis 4b:** PIED will be negatively related to continuance commitment

### Goal Orientation

The social-cognitive model of motivation and personality proposed by Dweck (1986; Dweck & Leggett, 1988) has attracted considerable attention from those interested in learning in educational and organisational settings. The model suggests that individuals will approach challenging learning and performance situations with different underlying goal orientations (Fisher & Ford, 1998; VandeWalle, 2001). A learning (or mastery) orientation reflects a preference for developing and improving competence through the acquisition of new skills and knowledge. In contrast, a performance orientation reflects a preference for proving one’s ability relative to others and avoiding negative evaluations (Colquitt & Simmering, 1998; VandeWalle, 2001).

Goal orientation was originally conceived as a unidimensional, bi-polar construct with individuals falling somewhere on a spectrum ranging from strong performance orientation to a strong learning orientation (Dweck, 1986). Subsequently, research suggested that there were two separate traits, and now it is generally accepted that goal orientation comprises three factors: a performance approach orientation (where the focus is on gaining positive evaluations), a performance avoid orientation (where the focus is avoiding negative evaluations), and a learning orientation (Button, Mathieu, & Zajac, 1996; VandeWelle, 1997).

Studies exploring linkages between goal orientation and various outcomes have typically reported positive associations between learning orientation and achievement in both educational and organisational settings (Schraw, Horn, Thorndike-Christ, & Bruning, 1995; Sujan, Weitz, & Kumar, 1994; VandeWalle, Brown, Cron, & Slocum, 1999). Results for performance-orientation are generally a little more mixed, with some studies reporting positive associations with achievement (Sujan et al., 1994) and others non-significant or negative relationships (Schraw et al., 1995; VandeWalle et al., 1999). The mixed findings for performance-orientation may be in part due to a failure in some studies to distinguish between performance approach and performance avoid orientations, with detrimental effects considered especially likely for those with
a performance avoid orientation (VandeWalle, Cron & Slocum, 2001; Zweig & Webster, 2004).

Of particular relevance to the present study is research that has considered the impact of goal-orientation on a broader array of outcomes including affective reactions, intentions to participate in development activities, and the transfer of learning. The research literature is surprisingly sparse with relatively few studies having considered such relationships, especially in a work-related context. Early studies exploring the impact of goal-orientation on affective responses have used student participants and concentrated on satisfaction with performance on the learning task (Jagacinski & Nicholls, 1984). Results from these studies have generally shown that a learning orientation is more likely to be associated with satisfaction. In one of the few studies with a non-student population Van Yperen and Janssen (2002) found that a performance orientation was associated with diminished job satisfaction, but only when job demands were high and learning orientation was low. Taken together these studies show learning oriented individuals generally exhibit greater intrinsic interest and task enjoyment which suggests that they might also be expected to manifest greater job satisfaction. Moreover, given evidence linking learning orientation with work performance (Sujan et al., 1994; VandeWalle et al., 1999), the suggestion that a performance avoid orientation is most likely to impact negatively on work performance (VandeWalle, 2001; Zweig and Webster, 2004), and the well established link between performance and job satisfaction (Judge, Parker, Colbert, Heller and Ilies, 2002) we offer the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis 5a: learning orientation will be positively associated with job satisfaction.
Hypothesis 5b: performance avoid orientation will be negatively associated with job satisfaction.

Intrinsic to the definition of learning orientation is a preference on the part of learning oriented individuals to improve their understanding or to increase their competence (Button et al., 1996). Because learning oriented individuals are motivated by competence development it seems natural that they would be more inclined than those with a performance orientation to seek out development opportunities. Accordingly we offer the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis 6a: learning orientation will be positively associated with intentions to undertake further work-related development.
Hypothesis 6b: performance avoid orientation will be negatively associated with intentions to undertake further work-related development.

Learning orientation has also been positively implicated in skill and learning transfer. In studies where a mastery orientation has been induced this was found to be related, albeit indirectly, to subsequent performance on more difficult and complex tasks (Kozlowski et al., 2001). Likewise, Chiaburu and Marinova (2005) reported positive associations between a dispositional measure of learning orientation and reports by employees of skill transfer from an instructional to a work environment. In the same study Chiaburu and Marinova (2005) found that a performance avoid orientation was unrelated to self-reported skill transfer. We therefore propose the following hypotheses:
Hypothesis 7a: learning orientation will be positively associated with learning transfer.

Hypothesis 7b: performance avoid orientation will be unrelated to learning transfer.

Interactions

Lately there have been calls for greater attention to how situational and dispositional factors associated with employee development might interact (Chiaburu & Marinova, 2005; Colquitt et al., 2000; Chen, Gully, Whiteman & Kilcullen, 2000). Goal orientation is of particular interest as it is regarded as a hybrid construct with both proximal, state-like elements and more distal, trait-like aspects (Elliot & Church, 1997). Chen et al. (2000) found the impact of trait goal orientation on learning performance was mediated by proximal, state-like constructs such as specific self-efficacy and goals. Kozlowski et al. (2001) reported similar results, but did find trait goal orientation and training goals to have separate independent effects. What is notable in both of these studies is that the state-like situational aspect of goal orientation under consideration was highly specific to the learning situation. What remains to be explored is how more distal situational influences, such as learning climate, might interact with dispositional goal orientation to affect a broader range of work-related variables. The literature surrounding Person-Organisation (PO) fit suggests that when individuals and organisations are congruent on salient factors this has a positive impact on a number of organisational outcomes, including job satisfaction and organisational commitment (Verquer, Beehr & Wagner, 2003). Likewise, trait-activation theory stresses the important role that contextual cues may play in triggering the effects of individual traits (Tett & Burnett, 2003). Therefore, as well as considering climate and goal orientation separately, we investigate here the possibility of interaction effects between these contextual and individual factors and offer the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis 8a: Based on the PO fit literature we suggest that job satisfaction is expected to be enhanced when PIED and learning orientation are both strong.

Hypothesis 8b: We also suggest that affective commitment is expected to be enhanced when PIED and learning orientation are both strong.

Hypothesis 8c: Based on trait activation theory we suggest PIED will moderate the impact of learning orientation on development intentions such that the positive impact of learning orientation will be dependent on PIED.

Hypothesis 8d: Likewise we suggest PIED will moderate the impact of learning orientation on learning transfer such that the positive impact of learning orientation will be dependent on PIED.

Method

Participants

A self-report questionnaire was sent to 4,991 students enrolled for tertiary study at a regional university that provides specialized distance education services. A total of 2,372 surveys were returned (48%). Because of our interest in PIED we elected to include only full-time employees (those working 30+ hours per week), those who worked in organizations with 6 or more employees, and eliminated responses from
owner/operators. We then applied listwise deletion to cases with missing data. This resulted in a final sample size of 1278 (26%).

The average participant was aged 37.8 years (SD=9.1) and was female (55.2%). There was a reasonable spread of positions with 38% describing themselves as non-management, 10.8% as supervisors, 38.2% as middle managers, and 13% as senior management. A majority of the participants worked in organizations employing 100+ staff (70.3%) and the most common period of tenure was 1-4 years (40.8%) followed by 5-9 years (20.6%).

**Measures**

*Perceived Investment in Employee Development* was measured using a shortened 6-item version of the original scale developed by Lee and Bruvold (2003). The items eliminated were those judged to have little relevance to those working in smaller organizations. An example of an item retained is “My organization trains employees on skills that prepare them for future jobs and career development.”

*Goal Orientation* was measured using items taken from scales developed by Button et al. (1996) and VandeWalle (1997). Where it was necessary items were modified to make them more generic and ensure they were applicable to work settings. Learning orientation was assessed using six items, an example of which is ‘The opportunity to do challenging work is important to me’. Performance avoid orientation was measured with five items, an example of which includes ‘Avoiding a show of low ability is more important to me than learning a new skill’.

*Organisational Commitment* was measured using the revised affective and continuance commitment scales developed by Meyer and Allen (1997). Affective commitment was assessed using 6-items, an example of which includes ‘I would be happy to spend the rest of my career in this organization’. Continuance commitment was measured using 7-items, an example of which includes ‘Right now, staying with my organization is a matter of necessity as much as desire’.

*Job Satisfaction* was assessed using a 3-item measure of general job satisfaction, adapted by Lee & Bruvold (2003) from Quinn & Stains (1977, cited in Lee & Bruvold, 2003). An example item is ‘Generally speaking, I am satisfied with my job’.

*Transfer of Learning* was assessed using two items developed from an earlier qualitative phase of the research. The two items were ‘I have been able to apply my learning at work’ and ‘My learning has improved the way I perform my job’.

*Intention to participate* was measured using a single item, ‘I am likely to undertake work-related development activities in the next 6 months’. This is consistent with past research where single item measures have been used to assess intentions (e.g. Noe & Wilk, 1993).

Items in all measures were coded 1=Strongly Disagree through to 7=Strongly Agree.

**Results**

Table 1 presents the means, standard deviations, alpha coefficients and zero-order correlations for all study variables. The alpha coefficients for the various scales indicate acceptable reliability.
Hierarchical ordinary least squares (OLS) regression was used to test our hypotheses. Table 2 shows the results of the moderated regression analyses for each of the outcome measures. For each of these analyses Model 1 includes only the main effects of PIED, learning orientation and performance avoid orientation. Model 2 introduces the interaction effects between PIED and goal orientation. Contrary to our expectations the moderated regression analyses provided little support for significant interactions between individual goal orientation and the state-like effects of work climate. For the most part the addition of interaction terms did not significantly improve the variance explained in any of the outcome measures.

Table 2: Moderated Regression Analyses of Goal Orientation and Learning Climate

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dependent Variable</th>
<th>Main Effects</th>
<th>Interactions</th>
<th>$R^2$</th>
<th>$\Delta R^2$</th>
<th>$F_{\text{change}}$</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>PIED</td>
<td>LO</td>
<td>PO</td>
<td>PIED</td>
<td>LO</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Job Satisfaction</td>
<td>Model 1</td>
<td>.50**</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td>-.01</td>
<td>.25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Model 2</td>
<td>.49*</td>
<td>-.06</td>
<td>.13*</td>
<td>-.21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Affective Commitment</td>
<td>Model 1</td>
<td>.45**</td>
<td>-.03</td>
<td>-.01</td>
<td>.20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Model 2</td>
<td>.36</td>
<td>-.05</td>
<td>-.04</td>
<td>.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Continuance Commitment</td>
<td>Model 1</td>
<td>-.12**</td>
<td>-.05</td>
<td>.18**</td>
<td>.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Model 2</td>
<td>.20</td>
<td>.07</td>
<td>.16*</td>
<td>.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transfer Intentions</td>
<td>Model 1</td>
<td>.23**</td>
<td>.15**</td>
<td>-.02</td>
<td>.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Model 2</td>
<td>.47*</td>
<td>.24*</td>
<td>-.03</td>
<td>.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Performance Orientation</td>
<td>Model 1</td>
<td>.36**</td>
<td>.04</td>
<td>-.05</td>
<td>.14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Model 2</td>
<td>.21</td>
<td>-.00</td>
<td>-.06</td>
<td>.03</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**p<0.001 (2-tailed)  
*p<0.05 (2-tailed)  
PIED=Perceived Investment in Employee Development; LO=Learning Orientation; PO=Performance Orientation (Avoid)
However, as hypothesised both PIED and goal orientation accounted for significant variance in the work outcome measures. In Model 1 PIED was significantly and positively related to job satisfaction ($\beta = .50$, $p < .001$), affective commitment ($\beta = .45$, $p < .001$), transfer ($\beta = .23$, $p < .001$) and intentions to undertake further work-related development ($\beta = .36$, $p < .001$) thus supporting hypotheses 1-4a. Moreover, consistent with hypothesis 4b PIED was significantly and negatively related to continuance commitment ($\beta = -.12$, $p < .001$). In contrast, our hypotheses relating to goal orientation were only partially supported. Consistent with hypotheses 7a and 7b learning orientation was significantly and positively related to transfer ($\beta = .15$, $p < .001$) whilst performance avoid orientation was found to be unrelated to transfer ($\beta = -.02$, ns). None of the other hypothesised associations between goal orientation and work outcomes were significant. Although no specific hypothesis was proposed performance avoid orientation was found to be positively and significantly related to continuance commitment ($\beta = .18$, $p < .001$).

**Discussion**

In this study we set out to explore the contributions of dispositional goal orientation and organisational support for employee development to a range of work-related outcome variables including intentions to participate in future development, job satisfaction, organisational commitment, and learning transfer. Results suggest that employees from a wide range of organisational settings respond favourably to efforts by their employer to foster skill development, employability and career advancement. These findings are consistent with previous research which has shown PIED to have strong positive associations with job satisfaction and affective commitment for nurses working in healthcare organisations (Lee & Bruvold, 2003). Research on perceived organisational support (POS) proposes that these positive responses are engendered through a process of reciprocity and social exchange whereby employees react to favourable treatment from the organisation and evidence that their employer cares by developing positive organisational and job-related attitudes (Eisenberger, Armeli, Rexwinkel, Lynch & Rhoades, 2001). What our results and those of Lee and Bruvold (2003) underline, is the considerable influence of employee development initiatives in building and sustaining such positive exchange relationships. Recent sentiments associated with the ‘new’ psychological contract suggest that development is solely the employee’s responsibility (Cavanaugh & Noe, 1999). However, we believe given that investment in employee skill development, training, career advancement, and employability can generate many positive organisational outcomes, that it is prudent for organisations to play a more active role and tangibly demonstrate their commitment to fostering employee development.

In the present study we extended the research of Lee and Bruvold (2003) to consider the impact of PIED on a broader range of work-related outcomes than hitherto considered. We found PIED to be positively associated with self-reported transfer of tertiary learning to the job and also intentions to engage in further work-related development activities. Thus, not only does PIED appear to contribute to favourable work-related attitudes, but we submit that it may also help build a virtuous cycle whereby organisations that emphasise development have employees that are more inclined to seek out and take up development opportunities, who then are more willing to apply their learning in the workplace, which in turn benefits the organisation and may further enhance PIED.
Somewhat surprisingly we found that individual learning orientation was not associated with work-related development intentions. It may be that this simply reflects the reality for many employees that work-related development opportunities are outside of their control. Some support for this explanation emerged from a supplemental analysis which revealed that in contrast to the non-significant links with work-related development intentions learning orientation had strong positive associations with intentions to undertake further tertiary study. This indicates that when participation is under the control of the individual and outside of the work realm then learning orientation is predictive of intentions. Although speculative these results underscore the importance of considering contextual elements when examining employee uptake of training opportunities. Moreover, the findings remind us of the need to be cautious when generalising to the workplace results from studies that have examined the impact of learning orientation in a purely educational setting.

Although the hypothesised relationships relating to continuance commitment were supported the amount of variance accounted for was modest and therefore further research is called for to confirm the robustness of these results. Contrary to our expectations hypothesised interaction effects between trait goal orientation and learning climate resulted in no significant changes in the amount of variance accounted for in the outcome measures. However, this may be due in part to difficulties disentangling situational strength from type. As Tett & Burnett (2003) point out, when contextual cues are strong then there is likely to be little variation in trait activation. Further complicating the interpretation of our results is the fact that Tett and Burnett’s (2003) interactionist model argues that trait activation cues are sourced at multiple levels, not just organisational (e.g. PIED), but also at the social level (e.g. peer and supervisor support) and task level (e.g. nature of the work itself). Thus, it might be the case that even if PIED is of sufficient strength to activate goal orientation other cue demands (such as routine work with few learning opportunities or intrinsic job satisfaction) might suppress relevant trait activation. Assessment of contextual demands at multiple levels would help clarify such relationships.

Several limitations must be borne in mind when interpreting the results from the present study. Foremost amongst them is the cross-sectional nature of the design. As with any survey of this type one must be cautious about inferring causal relationships amongst the variables of interest. Also a threat is the reliance on self-report measures and associated concerns regarding common method variance. However, self-report measures have been widely used in other similar studies (e.g. Lee & Bruvold, 2003; Chiaburu & Marinova, 2005) and given the individual nature of many of the outcome variables of interest (e.g. job satisfaction, organisational commitment, intentions) few other options are feasible. Finally, there are issues surrounding the measurement of some of the constructs. In particular, we note the modest reliability coefficients for the goal orientation measures, the use of a single item intentions measure with unknown reliability, and evidence of range restriction on the learning orientation scale.

Bearing in mind the study limitations, nonetheless the results serve to highlight the significant independent contribution of both individual (trait goal orientation) and situational factors (perceptions of support for employee development) for the prediction of valued work-related outcomes. A positive climate for employee development was associated with a wider range of outcomes and was generally more
influential than employee goal orientation. This suggests that organisations should concentrate on building an environment supportive of learning and career development. However, further research, especially longitudinal, is called for to clarify causal pathways and to confirm the generalisability of these results.

References


