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Recommended Citation

Larson, Rachel E. Klemme and Bell, Alexandra A. (2013). "Adjusting to Work Life: Individual Factors that Impact Young Adults' Success in the Workplace the First Year after Graduation," *Adult Education Research Conference*. <https://newprairiepress.org/aerc/2013/papers/28>

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Adjusting to Work Life: Individual Factors that Impact Young Adults' Success in the Workplace the First Year after Graduation

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Abstract: Young adults experience multiple transitions in their first year after college graduation including newcomer adjustment, the process of becoming integrated into a new job and organization during the first year of employment. In this paper we describe our empirical study of relationships among psychological capital (PsyCap), proactive behaviors, and newcomer adjustment outcomes.

Each year more than 1.6 million young adults graduate with a bachelor's degree from a postsecondary institution in the United States (Aud et al., 2011). Many of these young adults enter the workforce after graduation and experience *newcomer adjustment*, the process of learning the tasks of a new job and becoming integrated into an organization during the first year of employment (Bauer, Bodner, Erdogan, Truxillo, & Tucker, 2007). All new employees go through an initial learning and adjustment period, especially during the first year. The process is particularly challenging for traditionally-aged, new college graduates who are starting their first professional position while simultaneously experiencing multiple life transitions (Reichert & Pihet, 2000). The extent to which a young adult successfully adjusts as a newcomer in an organization can impact his or her professional and personal development in terms of well-being, adult identity, and decision-making abilities (Ng & Feldman, 2007). Unsuccessful adjustment, which can cause young adults to perform less productively and ultimately leave the organization (Holton, 1995), can have negative consequences for the individual and the organization.

Both employing organizations and undergraduate education institutions have a stake in the success of new graduates in the workforce. For each new employee that leaves, organizations incur 1 to 2 years' worth of salary and benefits costs by restarting the recruitment and training process (Fitz-Enz, 1997). Employers may be less likely to hire future graduates from institutions whose newcomers consistently struggle (Geroy, 1990). Organizations developed programs to train and socialize new hires, often with little regard to their age or prior experience (Gruman, Saks, & Zweig, 2006). In preparing graduates for success in the workforce, undergraduate institutions have focused on matching students' interests, attributes, and career choices and developing students' prerequisite skills and knowledge (Henscheid, 2008). Little is known, however, about individual factors that impact newcomers' success in a new job, particularly among young adults entering the professional workforce. The purpose of this study was to identify characteristics and behaviors among traditionally-aged recent college graduates that relate to their adjustment as newcomers in an organization. The outcomes inform practices in undergraduate education and employing organizations that enable young adults to be successful in the workplace their first year after graduation.

Individual Factors Related to Newcomer Adjustment

We describe newcomer adjustment in terms of three work-related outcomes: job performance, job satisfaction, and organizational commitment. Two research perspectives, psychological capital and

proactive behaviors, highlight the influence that individual factors can have on these outcomes. In each perspective employees are viewed as proactive agents positively influencing their own adjustment through specific qualities and behaviors.

PsyCap

Psychological capital (PsyCap) reflects a positive focus on individual attributes that help employees reach their maximum potential. Instead of emphasizing “what you know,” PsyCap focuses on “who you are” and “who you are becoming” (Luthans, Youssef, & Avolio, 2007, p. 20). Luthans et al. (2007) defined PsyCap as “an individual’s positive psychological state of development” (p. 3), consisting of four developmental qualities (self-efficacy, hope, optimism, and resiliency) that are positive, theory- and research-based, measurable, and state-like. When combined they create a higher order core construct that is “greater than the sum of its parts” (p. 19).

PsyCap’s state-like quality, which is more malleable than fixed traits, allows it to be developed if presented with an effective intervention and a supportive environment (Luthans et al., 2007). This quality was demonstrated by Luthans, Avey, Avolio, and Peterson (2010) in a study of undergraduate management students. Students ($n = 153$) who participated in a 2-hour in-person training focused on developing PsyCap experienced an increase in pre- to post-test PsyCap levels, while members of the control group ($n = 89$) who participated in a 2-hour in-person training on group decision making experienced practically no change in PsyCap.

Past research has consistently associated PsyCap with job performance, job satisfaction, and organizational commitment, three key indicators of newcomer adjustment. In a meta-analysis of 51 samples ($N = 12,567$), Avey, Reichard, Luthans, and Mhatre (2011) found that PsyCap had large correlations with job satisfaction, moderate correlations with organizational commitment and self-rated performance, and small correlations with supervisor-rated performance and objective performance. These results were consistent across both student and working adult populations, which suggest that PsyCap may be an important component of successful newcomer adjustment, including adjustment among recent college graduates, through its positive relationship to job performance, job satisfaction, and organizational commitment.

Proactive Behaviors

Proactive behaviors serve as positive, deliberate ways for newcomers to take action in their newcomer adjustment process (Crant, 2000). They consist of sensemaking (information and feedback seeking), relationship building (general socializing, networking, and building relationships with one’s boss), negotiation of job changes, and positive framing (Ashford & Black, 1996). By engaging in proactive behaviors newcomers can actively help themselves learn the information and develop the relationships essential to successful adjustment.

Newcomers who utilize proactive behaviors exhibit better job performance, higher levels of job satisfaction, and more commitment to their employers. Ashford and Black (1996) reported that among 69 MBA graduates employed as practicing managers four proactive behaviors (building relationships with one’s boss, positive framing, information seeking, and feedback seeking) were positively correlated with job performance and three behaviors (positive framing, general socializing, and networking) were positively correlated with job satisfaction. Gruman et al. (2006) discovered the same proactive behaviors

minus general socializing had similar positive relationships with job satisfaction and organizational commitment among 140 undergraduate management students completing a 4-month full-time co-op experience. The outcomes of these studies suggest that newcomers who are more proactive are more likely to experience successful newcomer adjustment during their first year.

Methods

We conducted a non-experimental, self-report survey study to answer our research question: To what extent and in what ways do individual characteristics, including PsyCap and proactive behaviors, explain variance in indicators of newcomer adjustment (self-rated job performance, job satisfaction, and organizational commitment) among employed college graduates during their first year after graduation? The survey comprised demographic questions and pre-established reliable measures of PsyCap (Luthans et al., 2007), proactive behaviors (Ashford & Black, 1996), job performance (Heilman, Block, & Lucas, 1992), job satisfaction (Hackman & Oldham, 1980), and organizational commitment (Meyer & Allen, 1991).

The target population was 4,610 bachelor's degree graduates from the Class of 2009 at a large East Coast university who were employed in the first year after graduation. Participants were invited to participate in an online survey through messages sent to 830 members of the institution's "Class of 2009" Facebook group. A total of 144 individuals entered the survey and out of that number 73 complete surveys were available for data analysis. Statistical analyses using SPSS v. 19 included descriptive and correlational strategies to explain variance in the three outcome variables. Statistical tests were set at alpha level = .05 (two-tailed).

Demographic profile of the survey sample was 80% female and 85% Caucasian/White, with a mean age of 22.77 years ($SD = .84$). Approximately 66% of the participants were employed full-time and 34% were employed part-time and enrolled in graduate school either full-time or part-time. The participants worked in a variety of industries including education (20.5%), health care/social services (17.8%), and retail/wholesale (12.3%). They held an average of 1.68 jobs ($SD = .80$) since graduating with a bachelor's degree and had been in their current position for an average of 10.35 months ($SD = 11.47$).

Findings

Overall, participants rated their job performance as moderately high ($M = 7.75$, $SD = 1.0$, on a 1-9 scale), were satisfied with their jobs ($M = 4.18$, $SD = 1.15$, on a 1-6 scale), and had moderately high commitment to their employing organization ($M = 4.24$, $SD = 1.19$, on a 1-6 scale). For the independent variables, participants had moderately high levels of PsyCap ($M = 113.22$, $SD = 16.22$, on a scale of 24-144). Among the seven proactive behaviors, each measured on a scale of 1-5, newcomers engaged most frequently in information seeking ($M = 4.14$, $SD = .83$) and positive framing ($M = 4.05$, $SD = .67$), and least frequently in negotiation of job changes ($M = 2.79$, $SD = .93$). Mean standard deviations ranged from .67 to 1.13, showing the highest variability in networking and general socializing.

To answer our overarching research question regarding the extent and ways individual characteristics, including PsyCap and proactive behaviors, explained variance in indicators of newcomer adjustment, we conducted hierarchical multiple regression analyses. In the final regression models, 25% of the variance in self-rated job performance ($R^2 = .25$, $F(1,69) = 9.05$, $p < .001$) and job satisfaction ($R^2 = .25$, $F(1,69) = 8.95$, $p < .001$) was explained by three independent variables: number of months in

the job, PsyCap, and the proactive behavior of general socializing. PsyCap made the largest contribution in explaining variance in both outcomes ($\beta = .39, p < .001$). Number of months in the job made the next largest contribution ($\beta = .29-.30, p < .01$); followed by general socializing ($\beta = .25, p < .05$).

The final regression model for organizational commitment was similar to the models for job performance and job satisfaction in that PsyCap and general socializing made significant contributions to the model. However, number of months in the job was not significantly related to organizational commitment. A second proactive behavior, information seeking, did contribute to the model. Together PsyCap, information seeking, and general socializing explained 35% of the variance in organizational commitment ($R^2 = .35, F(1,69) = 13.65, p < .001$). General socializing made the largest contribution in the final block of the model ($\beta = .47, p < .001$), followed by PsyCap ($\beta = .22, p < .05$) and information seeking ($\beta = .18$).

Discussion

To our knowledge, this is the first study to examine relationships among PsyCap, proactive behaviors, and newcomer adjustment outcomes among traditionally-aged recent college graduates working in professional settings 1 year post-graduation. Four variables in particular (PsyCap, the proactive behaviors of general socializing and information seeking, and number of months in the job) played a large role in explaining variance in the outcomes of self-rated job performance, job satisfaction, and organizational commitment, with higher levels of each factor relating to higher adjustment outcomes. Two variables, PsyCap and general socializing, contributed to explaining variance in all three outcomes. These findings support our framing PsyCap and proactive behaviors as complementary characteristics that may positively relate to recent college graduates' successful adjustment in the workforce.

In our study PsyCap had a strong positive relationship with self-rated job performance and job satisfaction. Interestingly, PsyCap had a stronger relationship with these outcomes than with organizational commitment. Our findings may reflect the reality that younger workers have numerous jobs in their professional career and may not stay with their current employer for an extended period of time regardless of their level of PsyCap (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2012). Nonetheless, PsyCap's positive relationship with all three adjustment outcomes suggests that supporting traditionally-aged students' development of PsyCap during college may enable them to be successful newcomers.

The proactive behavior of general socializing also related positively to each newcomer adjustment outcome, in particular organizational commitment. Building relationships with coworkers and supervisors is especially important for traditionally-aged recent college graduates who are experiencing multiple transitions and establishing new post-college friendships (Reichert & Pihet, 2000). Closeness with supportive colleagues and mentors may influence newcomers to stay at the organization. Once relationships are established, newcomers are then able to seek information about the organization, gain feedback on performance, and acquire skills and support in order to perform well and be satisfied with the job (Ashford & Black, 1996). This is why we believe general socializing had a stronger relationship with organizational commitment than with the two other newcomer adjustment outcomes (perceived job performance and job satisfaction). General socializing serves as the foundational proactive behavior that allows newcomers to subsequently employ other proactive behaviors that may have greater impact on perceived job performance and job satisfaction long term (Saks, Gruman, & Cooper-Thomas, 2011).

In addition to general socializing, the proactive behavior of information seeking explained a notable portion of the variance in organizational commitment. This finding indicates that the more information traditionally-aged recently graduated newcomers learn about the organization, the more likely they are to be committed to the employer. Information seeking is especially important for young adults who likely have little exposure to the professional world (Holton, 1995). Learning about the employing organization and how to effectively navigate a professional job helps to reduce uncertainty that may be even more pronounced during the school-to-work transition and organizational entry (Ashford & Black, 1996).

In our study we found few statistically significant correlations between PsyCap and proactive behaviors. Only positive framing and information seeking had a significant relationship with PsyCap. This result is interesting since self-efficacy, a component of PsyCap, has been linked to the proactive behaviors of feedback seeking, information seeking, general socializing, building a relationship with one's boss, and networking (Gruman et al., 2006). The difference in findings suggests that when self-efficacy is combined with hope, optimism, and resiliency to represent overall PsyCap, the relationship of self-efficacy alone with proactive behaviors is reduced. The large correlation between PsyCap and positive framing reflects a conceptual similarity between the optimism component of PsyCap and viewing situations in a positive light, which characterizes positive framing. We were unable to identify empirical studies in addition to ours in which this relationship was apparent. However, it seems that, overall, newcomers with varying levels of PsyCap engage in proactive behaviors during their first year in the professional workforce. Thus, high levels of PsyCap are not essential in order for newcomers to engage in proactive behaviors and vice versa, but they can both relate to newcomers' success.

The findings indicate traditionally-aged recent college graduates who possess PsyCap and engage in proactive behaviors in their employment, especially in socializing and seeking information, consistently report higher levels of adjustment in terms of self-rated job performance, job satisfaction, and organizational commitment. The consistency of the findings across adjustment outcomes suggests that individual PsyCap and proactive behaviors may indeed play an important role in newcomer adjustment among recent college graduates.

Implications

The implications of this study for adult learning are two-fold. First, both PsyCap and proactive behaviors can be developed through intentional learning activities (Luthan et al., 2010). College educators can use experiential activities (Holton, 1995) in academic and co-curricular settings like Senior Year Experience courses and Career Services programs to develop students' PsyCap and proactive behaviors. In organizations, new employee training and supports can be customized to meet the needs of recent college graduates in ways that enhance continued development of these attributes and behaviors. Second, further research is warranted to identify *how* PsyCap and engagement in proactive behaviors, especially general socializing, relate to learning new job tasks and responsibilities as well as the organizational culture. With this knowledge, it may be possible to design formal and informal learning experiences in organizations that maximize the positive role these two individual attributes play in work-related outcomes such as job performance, satisfaction, and organizational commitment and to shift the recent graduate's mental model from college student to working professional (Sheckley, 2009).

HRD professionals in organizations and educators in higher education have the opportunity to work toward a common goal of helping traditionally-aged college students learn to succeed as young

adults in the professional workforce. Supporting the development of these individual qualities across higher education and organizational settings may result in a better prepared, more satisfied, and more committed workforce (Gruman et al., 2006).

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