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# **Learning and Adaptation of Contingent Workers in South Korea Corporations: A Study of Developmental Relationships**

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Keywords: contingent workers, developmental relationships, developmental network, leaning, adaptation

**Abstract:** Developmental relationships have been considered an important factor for leaning and adaptation of workers. This paper aims to discover how the learning and adaptation of contingent workers differ from those of regular workers and focuses on developmental relationships in South Korea corporations.

## **Purpose and Problem Statement**

Developmental relationships exist in formal and informal forms, and play an important role in the learning and adaptation of early career workers. Developmental relationships are defined as various relationships individuals form at work that help them grow by providing information and psychological support related to the organization and work in the process of learning. The workers establish a developmental network as a collection of such relationships (Higgins & Kram, 2001; Kram, 1985). Prominent international companies and Korean corporations have been making an effort to promote workers' adaptation and learning by recognizing the importance of learning through these relationships that exist in informal forms within the company. The companies have attempted to make these relationships formal, and to connect them to organizational outcomes. The representative cases are the implementation of mentoring programs and the operation of communities of practice (CoP). Mentoring may be defined as formal and informal relationships between mentor and mentee to support individuals obtaining necessary knowledge in order to function effectively in the workplace. Meanwhile, CoP may be described as formal and informal groups for facilitating learning and further practice through sharing knowledge and information among participants that have matters of common interest. Mentoring programs and CoP have common value based on developmental relationships (Joo & Kim, 2004; Na et al., 2006; Wenger et al., 2002). In spite of the fact that there have been diverse discussions and implementations of these programs, not many studies have been done that systematically examine the effect of formal programs, such as mentoring programs and CoP, and informal developmental network of workers.

The type and influence of developmental relationships can appear differently depending on the workers' employment status. In recent years, although the number of contingent workers has steadily increased and they almost work similar matters in common with regular workers, most discussions have been limited to regular workers. This paper focuses on the developmental relationships within business organizations and how learning and adaptation of contingent workers differ from those of regular workers by examination of the following questions. Are there differences between contingent workers and regular workers in the way they participate in 'learning through formal relationships (formal developmental relationships)'? How do the developmental network's attributes and functions of contingent workers differ from those of

regular workers? How is the way learning and adaptation of contingent workers influenced by their participations in formal developmental relationships and their developmental network compare with that of regular workers?

### **Existing Studies**

Existing studies consistently report that participating in mentoring programs and CoP affect early career workers' learning and adaptation. First of all, mentoring programs exert positive influence not only on the organizational socialization and career development of new members, but also on the organization level as well (Viator, 2001; Wilson & Elman, 1990). New workers who participated in mentoring programs were actually affected more positively than those who did not in terms of acquiring job skill and satisfaction, organizational knowledge, as well as organizational commitment and turnover intention (Kim, 2003). Therefore, participation in mentoring programs provides early career workers with valuable help and affects them positively in learning and adaptation.

Participation in CoP also benefit newly hired employees because they can gather information needed for individual learning and life in the organization more comprehensively. Through their relationship with other members, they receive help in adapting to the organization, as well as become a positive influence on the community and the organization (Wenger et al., 2002). In fact, it has been shown that participation in CoP has been a positive influence on role understanding, learning work skills, organizational commitment and reducing turnover (Chang, 2005).

In light of this, obtained legitimacy of participation among members is a premise for promoting learning in the workplace and an important inducement for learning (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Accordingly, allowing contingent workers to formally participate in relational learning results in their legitimate participation that will exert positive influence on their learning and adaptation.

Meanwhile, the attributes and functions of informal developmental network also influence the learning and adaptation of early career workers. Morrison (2002) examined 154 new employees of accounting firms and showed that there was a correlation between the variables that produce organizational socialization and network types. He classified relationship networks as informational ties and friendship ties according to function, and found that as informational ties grew in number, density, and strength, they exerted a more positive influence for obtaining organizational knowledge, task mastery, and role clarity within the organization. Specifically, the range of informational ties showed a positive correlation with organizational knowledge, and position influenced role clarity and task mastery. As the strength of friendship ties increased, so too did their social integration and organizational commitment.

Higgins & Thomas (2001) performed a comparative analysis on traditional mentoring relationships and developmental network, and reported that developmental network exerted influence on long-run career outcomes and intentions to remain with one's firm. Specifically, the range of developmental network positively affects work satisfaction and intentions to remain. In addition, the authors asserted that psychological support positively affects work satisfaction, and career support positively affects intentions to remain.

Higgins & Kram (2001) classified the types of developmental network into entrepreneurial networks, opportunistic networks, traditional networks, and receptive networks, focusing on the strength and range of relationships. Entrepreneurial networks, which have high relational strength and a wide range, positively affect career movement. For individual learning,

traditional networks, which have a narrow range but high relational strength like entrepreneurial networks and are composed of a small number of supporters, also exert a positive influence. On the other hand, opportunistic networks, which have a wide range but low relational strength, exert a negative influence. Regarding adaptation, traditional networks showed a positive correlation with organizational commitment. Opportunistic networks and receptive networks, which have a narrow range and low relational strength, showed a negative correlation with work satisfaction.

The attributes and functions of developmental network can affect the learning and adaptation of early career workers in different ways. Unfortunately, the results of these studies are mainly limited to regular workers. Contingent workers also think that it is important to have the opportunity to develop their own abilities just like regular workers, and smooth relationships with their coworkers as contributing their learning and adaptation (Kim et al., 2006; Hall & Schneider, 1972). Nevertheless, it is difficult for contingent workers to have adequate opportunities for obtaining information related to work and professional learning and to form smooth relationships with coworkers, due to their unstable positions and separation from regular workers (Feldman et al., 1994; Rogers, 1995). These characteristic differences suggest that learning and adaptation through developmental relationships will not be accomplished as smoothly with contingent workers as with regular workers.

### **Research Design**

The research subjects were selected from early career office workers currently working in 34 large corporations located in Seoul, Korea and the surrounding metropolitan area who have been working for longer than three months and less than five years (Feldman, 1988). The selection of contingent workers was limited to workers whose duties were most similar to those of regular workers in terms of their work quantity and quality. A self-reported questionnaire was used as the survey tool to measure such items as participation of learning through formal relationships, the characteristics and functions of developmental networks, learning, and adaptation. A total of 532 questionnaires were retrieved, a retrieval rate of 59.99%. Surveys of people who were not suitable as research subjects and surveys with missing responses were excluded and produced a final total of 417 surveys (contingent: 157; regular: 260) for the analysis.

Participation in learning through formal relationships and the attributes and functions of developmental networks were set as independent variables, and learning and adaptation were set as dependent variables. The study tools were as follows. First, in the section related to learning through formal relationships, questions concerning experience of participating in mentoring programs and CoP activities were asked. Second, as developmental network attributes, such as range (size), department / work / gender homophily, status, duration, frequency, intimacy, degree of overlap with learning through formal relationships, and contents were selected. The network range indicated the number of people who have developmental relationships. Other variables were measured by asking respondents to list seven developmental supporters in the order of their importance using a self-reporting method, and answering questions appropriate for each of those supporters (Cross & Parker, 2004; Higgins & Kram, 2001; Morrison, 2002). Third, the developmental network functions were assessed through seven questions regarding career support and fourteen questions regarding psychological support, only information provided for the four most important people of the seven listed in the study (Noe, 1988). Fourth, the area of learning and adaptation (five -point scale) was composed of representative variables that have been mentioned in organizational socialization studies. Questions for learning were composed of five

questions each regarding work mastery, organizational values and knowledge, and belonging to the organization (Chao, et al., 1994). Questions for adaptation were composed of seven questions regarding job satisfaction (MSQ), five questions for organizational commitment (Mowday et al., 1979; Price & Mueller, 1986), and three questions for turnover intention (Higgins & Thomas, 2001). Lastly, matters on demographic statistical variables were asked. The reliability of the survey tools was measured through a pre-survey and survey questions were adjusted accordingly. After the conducting survey, factor analysis and reliability analysis were carried out to reformulate variables.<sup>4</sup> To examine the significant correlations and multicollinearity between each of the variables, a correlation analysis was also carried out. In the case of variables in which multicollinearity was suspect, all the values of standard deviation, changes in t-value sign, variance inflation factor (VIF), and tolerance were examined together if problems were identified, those variables were excluded.<sup>5</sup> Descriptive statistical analysis and hierarchical multiple regression analysis were used to verify results.

### Findings

Analysis revealed that regular workers participated in mentoring and CoP programs more than contingent workers.

Second, the developmental network for early career workers was found to be comparatively strong and intimate. However, contingent workers had a smaller developmental network, a higher level of identifying with their work, department and gender homophily, and a deeper intimacy with people who supported their development than regular workers. In addition, they established developmental network more readily with low status workers they met during learning and through formal relationships than regular workers. Furthermore, although there were no significant differences in learning and adapting according to work status, contingent workers had a higher level of learning in areas such as positive self-understanding, sense of belonging to an informal group, and work mastery.

Third, the results of multiple regression analysis on the variables participation in learning through formal relationships and developmental network that influence learning and adapting show that the two groups formed different types of relationships according to the learning and adaptation contents.

From these results, the following conclusions were derived: The formation of developmental relationships for contingent workers is in many ways limited compared to regular workers. This can be explained by the fact that contingent workers' participation in learning through formal relationships is lower than that of regular workers and that, in forming

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<sup>4</sup> Revised variables (the number of items / cronbach  $\alpha$ ) were: 1) The functions of developmental network - psychological support (7/.923) & career support (5/.862) 2) Learning - positive self-understanding (4/.831), organizational value & knowledge (3/.766), attachment to a group (3/.695) & work mastery (2/.671) 3) Adaptation – work adjustment (6/.833), turnover intention (3/.808)

<sup>5</sup> Finally, the variable regarding contents of developmental relationships was excluded because respondents replied multiple and the responds almost overlapped the functions of developmental network. Age, tenure, and frequency of contingent workers and tenure and frequency of regular worker had biased. So, the values of variables were transformed to the values of natural logarithms. However, frequency still had biased excessively. In this case, although the variable of 'the strength of ties' could be made through combining mean values of frequency and intimacy (Morrison, 2002), a frequency variable was excluded in final analysis because it is possible to interrupt original value of each variable and intimacy was generally used in the study of network as the variable for estimating strength of tie (Cross & Parker, 2004; Higgins & Kram, 2001; Morrison, 2002).

developmental network, contingent workers have a tendency to depend on people who are similar to themselves and thus form a more closed relationship network. This limitation has a high probability of functioning as a factor that obstructs their smooth learning and adaptation. Accordingly, contingent workers must make the effort to form relationships with many other people who are regular workers and others who are different from themselves, from whom they can receive more concrete help and support. Companies should provide help and support to enable contingent workers to overcome limitations to form developmental relationships.

Second, participation in learning through formal relationships, mentoring and CoP programs, affects the learning and adaptation of contingent workers more than regular workers. Both groups showed noticeable changes in their learning and adaptation when they participated in a CoP program or mentoring and CoP program in spite of the fact that contingent workers' participation in learning through formal relationships is lower than that of regular workers. Companies should provide learning through formal relationships opportunities to contingent workers at the organizational level and promote their active participation.

Third, a different approach needs to be taken in forming and inducing developmental relationships for individuals and businesses according to the learning and adaptation content. Early career individuals and companies that want to hire them need to take different approaches to forming and promoting developmental relationships based on the kind of learning and adapting needed for each employment status.

Lastly, in learning and adapting, both contingent and regular workers need to form intimate relationships with people who support their development and actively seek their assistance. This intimate relationship positively affects adaptation to work and turnover. In the case of acquiring job skills for contingent workers, however, intimacy actually produces a negative influence because of the limited developmental network formed by contingent workers. Contingent workers must form various developmental relationships with people who can help them with learning related to their work and must make an effort to generally maintain an intimate relationship with them.

### **Implications and Recommendations**

The results of this study may assist in mapping out the learning and adaptation strategies of early careers according to their employment status. At the company level, this study may assist corporations in developing concrete plans and promotional policies for early career workers' learning and adaptation. Finally, this study may assist in expanding leaning opportunities of contingent workers and changing the preoccupied perspectives of corporations and peers about them. For better research results, homogeneity among research subjects needs to be obtained for comparison and the range of subjects needs to be expanded. Concerning the latter, particularly in the case of contingent workers, research on workers other than temporary workers who work by the hour or non-standard workers needs to be carried out.

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