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**MAKING SENSE OF A NEW EMPLOYMENT RELATIONSHIP :
PSYCHOLOGICAL CONTRACT-RELATED
INFORMATION SEEKING AND THE ROLE OF
WORK VALUES AND LOCUS OF CONTROL**

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the information-seeking behaviors newcomers engage in relating to their psychological contract and addresses the impact of work values (Autonomy, Advancement, Group Orientation and Economic Rewards) and Work Locus of Control. We propose that these individual characteristics could explain differences in the frequency with which newcomers search for information about the promises their employer has made to them. A two-wave longitudinal study was conducted in which 527 newcomers from eight organizations (representing 3 sectors) participated. The results largely support the proposed relationships between work values and contract-related information seeking, while the relation between Work Locus of Control and contract-related information seeking is rather weak. Implications for psychological contract formation are discussed.

Key words: Psychological contracts; Information Seeking; Work Values; Locus of Control

Due to evolutions in the economic and social environment in which organizations operate, the nature of the employment relationship is undergoing fundamental changes that have implications for organizations and their employees (Roehling, Cavanaugh, Moynihan & Boswell, 2000; Schalk & Freese, 1997). In this context, the psychological contract is playing an increasingly important role in helping to define and understand the contemporary employment relationship (Millward & Brewerton, 2000; Schalk & Freese, 1997; Turnley & Feldman, 2000). Psychological contracts consist of individuals' beliefs regarding the terms and conditions of the exchange agreement between themselves and their organizations (Rousseau, 1989). They refer to the way the employment contract is interpreted, understood and enacted by employees at the interface between themselves and their employing organization (Millward & Brewerton, 2000). Psychological contracts emerge when individuals believe that their organization has promised to provide them with certain rewards in return for the contributions that they make to the organization (Turnley & Feldman, 2000).

A body of literature exists indicating that the psychological contract is an important motivator for employees. It shows that when individuals perceive a breach of promises or a lack of reciprocity between employer and employee contributions, their motivation and commitment to the organization decrease and they become more likely to leave their jobs. A positive psychological contract, by contrast, enhances commitment, intention to remain with the organization and organizational citizenship behaviors that go beyond the formal job description (e.g. Coyle-Shapiro & Kessler, 2000; Freese, Heinen & Schalk, 1999; Robinson & Morrison, 1994; 2000; Turnley & Feldman, 2000).

Managing the psychological contract is especially important when introducing new employees in the organization (Thomas & Anderson, 1998). Their motivation, commitment and length of stay with the organization will be affected by their perceptions regarding the terms of their employment relationship and the perceived fulfillment of these terms (Morrison & Robinson, 1997; Robinson, Kraatz & Rousseau, 1994). For this reason, understanding newcomers' expectations and beliefs about the terms of their employment relationship can provide important information for the development and implementation of effective HR-policies for new employees. In view of the economic and human costs associated with the premature departure of new hires, obtaining more insight in the issue of psychological contract formation is not only interesting from a scientific point of view, but also highly relevant from a practical standpoint.

The purpose of this paper is to contribute to our understanding of psychological contract formation among organizational newcomers, by focusing on the information-seeking

behaviors newcomers engage in when forming their psychological contract perceptions. Departing from the conceptualization of the psychological contract as a subjective mental model of the employment relationship, we address two types of individual dispositions that could explain interindividual differences in contract-related information seeking: the type of work values newcomers try to attain during their careers and work locus of control.

PSYCHOLOGICAL CONTRACT FORMATION AND INFORMATION SEEKING

The Psychological Contract as a Mental Model of the Employment Relationship

The conceptualization of the psychological contract is embedded in theories on social schemas (Morrison & Robinson, 1997; Rousseau, 1995; 2001; Shore & Tetrick, 1994). A schema is defined as a cognitive structure that represents organized knowledge about a given stimulus – a person or situation – as well as rules that direct information processing (Fiske & Taylor, 1984). Schemas affect the perception of incoming information, the retrieval of stored information, and inferences based on that information (Fiske & Taylor, 1984). In this respect, the psychological contract is conceived as a type of schema that individuals hold regarding their employment relationship. It is an individual's belief structure of what is expected to occur in the organization and what is expected of him/her in return (Rousseau, 1995; 2001; Shore & Tetrick, 1994). This schema helps an individual to define what the employment relationship entails, and it guides the interpretation and recollection of promises exchanged during the employment relationship. It means that these promises have no objective meaning but that they are perceptions of what was conveyed and what was meant (Rousseau, 1995). The subjective nature of the psychological contract implies that two parties to an employment relationship, e.g. an employee and his or her supervisor, may have different views on the terms of their relationship. For example, while an employee might believe promises about career opportunities have been expressed by the organization, his or her supervisor might believe no promises have been made in this respect.

Content Dimensions of the Psychological Contract

Although subjectivity is considered as a defining characteristic of psychological contracts, previous research has shown that they can be measured by focusing on a limited number of dimensions representing different content areas of employer inducements

comprising an individual's psychological contract (Rousseau & Tijoriwala, 1998). For these inducements, scales have been developed that can be used as more stable measures of discrete contract terms that can be generalized across populations (e.g. De Vos, Buyens & Schalk, 2003; Freese *et al.*, 1999; Robinson *et al.*, 1994; Robinson & Rousseau, 1994). However, as to date no generally agreed-upon scales for measuring these dimensions exist. Our review of the literature (e.g. Freese *et al.*, 1999; Herriot, Manning & Kidd, 1997; Rousseau, 1990; 1998; Schalk, Freese & Van den Bosch, 1995) shows that six dimensions are prevalent in many operationalizations of the content of the psychological contract. First, career development opportunities refer to opportunities for promotion and development within the organization or field of work. Second, job content refers to the provision of challenging, varied and interesting work. Third, financial rewards refer to the provision of appropriate rewards. Fourth, social atmosphere refers to the provision of a pleasant and cooperative work environment. Fifth, personal support refers to the provision of feedback and coaching in order to perform successfully on the job and within the organization in general. Sixth, respect for private life refers to the employer's respect and understanding for the employee's personal situation. For each of these dimensions, both employees and employers can believe promises have been conveyed to a greater or lesser extent.

Psychological Contract Formation during the Socialization Process

Although researchers agree about the conceptualization of the psychological contract as a mental schema of the employment relationship, little is known about how employees develop this schema as from the beginning of their employment relationship. Within the psychological contract literature, few studies have been published that have empirically addressed newcomer psychological contract development (De Vos *et al.*, 2003; Robinson *et al.*, 1994; Thomas & Anderson, 1998). These studies show that during the first years after entry, newcomers change their initial perceptions of the promises they have exchanged with their employer (De Vos *et al.*, 2003; Robinson *et al.*, 1994). Thomas & Anderson (1998) have studied these changes from a socialization perspective, i.e. by relating changes in newcomers' psychological contracts to information acquisition. These authors found significant effects of information acquired about social and role knowledge on changes in newcomers' expectations about employer inducements during the first eight weeks after entry. More specifically, social knowledge significantly affected changes in expectations about job security and family effects while role knowledge significantly affected changes in expectations about social/leisure aspects. These results suggest that information obtained by newcomers during the socialization process, i.e.

information about their work environment and their role within it, increases newcomers' expectations about employer inducements. These findings suggest that knowledge plays a role in psychological contract development. It implies that information seeking (as a process leading to increased knowledge) is not only relevant to study socialization outcomes, but that it is also a relevant variable to study psychological contract formation (Rousseau, 1995, 2001; Shore & Tetrick, 1994). In this way, theories on schema development and socialization theories are integrated in the conceptualization of psychological contract formation. Within the socialization literature the newcomer is conceived as an active agent, seeking and processing relevant socialization information (Bauer, Morrison & Callister, 1998; Miller & Jablin, 1991; Morrison, 1993a; 1993b; Ostroff & Kozlowski, 1992). Information seeking enables newcomers to reduce uncertainty and thereby to understand and master their new environment (Morrison, 1993a). Newcomers use information-seeking strategies in order to obtain previously unknown information on a range of issues regarding their new job role and the organizational setting (Morrison, 1993a; 1993b; Ostroff & Kozlowski, 1992). Psychological contract researchers propose that newcomers also seek information allowing them to understand the terms of their psychological contract. The study conducted by Thomas & Anderson (1998) is a first empirical confirmation of this thesis. Exchange of information about the psychological contract should contribute to a more realistic understanding of the terms of the employment relationship, thereby reducing the likelihood of perceived contract breach over time (De Vos *et al.*, 2003; Rousseau, 2001; Shore & Tetrick, 1994). Based on socialization research about newcomer information seeking, this paper addresses newcomers' information-seeking behaviors about their psychological contract. More specifically we focus on information seeking about the inducements newcomers can expect of their employer.

RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN INDIVIDUAL CHARACTERISTICS AND INFORMATION SEEKING

Theories on information seeking and the more basic theories on schema development propose that individual characteristics affect the information-seeking process (Ashford & Cummings, 1983). Depending on their particular goals, individuals will allocate more attention to certain information and only information that is personally relevant will be processed consciously (Fiske & Neuberg, 1990; Fiske & Taylor, 1984). Psychological contract researchers propose that this also holds for information seeking about the psychological contract. In this respect, Rousseau (1995) and Shore & Tetrick (1994) refer to employees'

work values or career motives as predictors of their psychological contracts. In addition, Rousseau (1995) mentions cognitive biases like perceptions of control as a second group of antecedents. Building on these typologies, in this paper we address two types of individual characteristics and their impact on newcomer information seeking about the psychological contract, namely (1) work values and (2) locus of control. While work values are subject to change as a function of employees' experiences during their careers, locus of control is a more stable personality trait. We focus on these two types of individual characteristics because organizational behavior literature shows that both are relevant for understanding important attitudes and behaviors in the workplace (e.g. Blau, 1993; Dawis & Lofquist, 1984; Judge & Bretz, 1992; Ravlin & Meglino, 1987; Spector & O'Connell, 1994). In addition to these, several other individual characteristics could also be relevant to study in relationship with the psychological contract (e.g. careerism, personality). Therefore our study should be considered as a first empirical contribution to our understanding of the factors affecting psychological contract formation during the initial stages of the employment relationship.

Work Values and Contract-Related Information Seeking

Work values are defined as the general and relatively stable goals that people try to reach through work (Super & Sverko, 1995; Schwartz, 1999). They are expressions of more general human values in the context of the work setting (Schwartz, 1999). Studies on work values have shown that these values affect individuals' vocational choices, as well as work-related attitudes and behaviors like job satisfaction, performance and turnover (e.g. Judge & Bretz, 1992; Roe & Ester, 1999; Ravlin & Meglino, 1987; Ross, Schwartz & Surkiss, 1999). The central thesis put forward in the domain of work values is that these values lead individuals to seek for jobs or organizations that are characterized by certain attributes (Dose, 1997). It is the fit between individual values and organizational characteristics that is proposed to affect employee attitudes and behaviors (Kristof, 1996; Van Vianen, 2000). The theoretical framework developed within the literature on person-organization (P-O) fit is also relevant for understanding the relationship between work values and the psychological contract. In essence, research on P-O fit concerns the antecedents and consequences of compatibility between people and the organizations in which they work (Van Vianen, 2000). Achieving high levels of P-O fit through hiring and socialization is often seen as the key to retaining motivated employees. P-O fit occurs when the organization satisfies the employee's needs, desires or preferences and when the employee satisfies the organization's demands (Kristof, 1996).

Within the P-O fit literature, work values are considered to play a central role because they shape the way in which individuals perceive and evaluate their experiences within the workplace (e.g. Dawis, 1991; Dawis & Lofquist, 1984). Thus, work values are proposed to affect individuals' attitudes and behaviors through their impact on their perceptions of organizational practices and of their employment relationship in general (James & James, 1989; Ravlin & Meglino, 1987).

Socialization researchers have applied this to the process of sensemaking during the initial stages of the employment relationship (Ashford, 1986; Chatman, 1991; Louis, 1980). According to Louis (1980) newcomers' sensemaking processes are based on their personal needs and predispositions. This has been empirically confirmed by Ashford (1986), who found that the importance an individual places on a particular goal within the employment relationship is related to the intensity of feedback seeking about that goal. Based on these findings we expect that work values will also affect newcomer information seeking about the psychological contract. We hereby address a theoretical proposition already put forward by Shore & Tetrick (1994) several years ago. These authors proposed that individuals seek for contract-related information that is consistent with their goals. For instance, individuals who value job security and long-term employment will focus on information regarding inducements such as career development opportunities.

Within the literature, several classifications of work values exist (e.g. Super, 1990; 1995; Coetsier & Claes, 1990; 1995; Dawis & Lofquist, 1984; Ravlin & Meglino, 1987; Roe & Ester, 1999; Schwartz & Bilsky, 1987; 1990). Based upon the categorization of values proposed by Super (1957), which has been further developed by the MOW international research team (Sverko & Super, 1995; Super, 1995), we focus on four basic types of work values for which we propose a relationship with contract-related information seeking exists. These values are: (1) advancement, (2) autonomy, (3) economic/material rewards, and (4) social values. These four categories of values are prevalent in several value typologies (e.g. Dawis, 1991; Borg, Hunt & Beck, 1991; Elizur & Sagie, 1999; Ros, Schwartz & Surkiss, 1999).

Advancement. People who value making advancement in their work and their career attach much importance to achievement, upward mobility, making progress, development, and power (London, 1983; Schein, 1993). For their career motivation, organizational inducements like career development programs and established career paths are important. They will actively seek for advancement opportunities by requesting to be considered for promotion, or by volunteering for important assignments. We expect advancement to be positively related to

information seeking about those aspects of the psychological contract that are directly related to the individual's development within the organization (career development) or indirectly through the provision of interesting work (which allows for on-the-job development) and personal support (i.e. coaching and feedback on performance).

***HIA:** There will be a positive relationship between the extent to which individuals value advancement and the frequency of information seeking about employer promises relating to job content, personal support, and career development.*

Autonomy. Individuals who value autonomy consider a certain degree of freedom to organize their life and work as they want, as important. They often have compromised themselves less towards the organization and they tend to seek for work situations in which they can be maximally free of organizational constraints to pursue their professional or technical competence (Schein, 1978; 1993). As a result, they generally expect less of the organization than others would to. Based upon this information we expect that employees for whom autonomy is important generally will search less frequently for information about what they can expect of their employer.

***HIB:** There will be a negative relationship between the extent to which individuals value autonomy and the frequency of information seeking about employer promises.*

Economic Rewards. Economic rewards are material or instrumental, in the sense that their external nature is concrete and of practical use (Elizur *et al.*, 1991). According to Locke & Taylor (1990), individuals who value economic rewards strongly base their self-concept on material outcomes, in particular the amount of money they earn. London (1983) describes how a financially-driven career motivation affects employees to search for work situations in which they perceive opportunities for financial rewards. They will strive for money by requesting pay raises or by changing jobs for a higher paying position.

***HIC:** There will be a positive relationship between the extent to which individuals value economic rewards and the frequency of information seeking about employer promises relating to financial rewards.*

Group Orientation. This category refers to values that are more centered around relations with people, including peers, supervisors, and others. These values deal with interpersonal relations, and they are affective rather than material (Elizur *et al.*, 1991). Individuals who look for social values within their work situation, often invest more in creating a social network at work (Locke & Taylor, 1990).

H1D: There will be a positive relationship between the extent to which individuals value group orientation and the frequency of information seeking about employer promises relating to the social atmosphere at work.

Work Locus of Control and Contract-Related Information Seeking

As to date the locus of control (LOC) construct has not been studied in relationship with the psychological contract. In our study we explore how Work LOC affects the information-seeking behaviors newcomers engage in relating to their psychological contract. LOC is conceived of as a belief that a response will, or will not, influence the attainment of reinforcement (Rotter, 1966). It is a ‘problem-solving’ generalized expectancy, addressing the issue of whether behaviors are perceived as instrumental for goal attainment, regardless of the specific nature of the goal or reinforcer (Furnham & Steele, 1993). Persons with an internal LOC tend to believe that reinforcements are determined largely by personal effort, ability and initiative, whereas persons with an external LOC believe that reinforcements are determined largely by other people, social structures, luck, or fate (O’Brien, 1984). Studies applying LOC to the work situation suggest that it is an important and useful dispositional variable for explaining attitudes and behaviors in work settings (Blau, 1993; Spector & O’Connell, 1994). More specifically, individuals with a strong internal work LOC are found to be more intrinsically motivated to do well on their jobs, are more committed to the organization and remain longer in their jobs (Hoff Macan, Trusty & Trimble, 1996; O’Brien, 1984; Spector, 1982). In his theory on work LOC Spector (1982) argues that, in contrast to externals, internals exert greater efforts to control their environment, exhibit better learning, seek new information more actively, use information better, and seem more concerned with information. In this sense, Renn & Fedor (2001) recently found that employees who believe to have control over their environment engage more actively in feedback-seeking behaviors than employees who experience no personal control. Based on findings and theories relating to work LOC, we propose that there will be a relationship between internal work LOC and the frequency with which new hires engage in information-seeking behaviors about employer promises.

H2: There will be a positive relationship between Internal LOC and the frequency of contract-related information seeking.

METHOD

Sample and Procedure

The respondent population consisted of 925 newly recruited employees in eight large firms located in Belgium, representing 3 sectors (Telecommunication, Consulting, and Banking & Insurance). In each of these organizations, new hires with a permanent employment contract were invited to participate in the study. Written surveys were used to collect data at two measurement occasions: at entry (T1) and four weeks after entry (T2). All new hires were invited to fill out the first questionnaire on the introduction day; the second questionnaire was sent to those who responded to the first questionnaire one month after entry. At each time, respondents could send back the questionnaire directly to the research team using a pre-stamped return envelope. At T1, 714 respondents filled out the first questionnaire, i.e. a 77 percent response rate. For the second questionnaire, usable data were obtained from 529 respondents. This represents 57 percent of the originally solicited sample and 74 percent of those newcomers who responded at T1. The analyses conducted were based on a total of 527 respondents. Two respondents (both belonging to one telecommunication firm) were excluded from the analyses because they indicated to have worked as a consultant for the organization before. Of all respondents, 65% were male and the average age was 26.12 years ($SD = 5.32$ years). Sixty-eight percent had an academic degree, whilst the others had a non-academic degree of higher education. About half the respondents already had professional experience (47%).

A comparison of those individuals who completed both questionnaires and those who did not on demographic characteristics indicated that there were no significant differences. The mean age of respondents who dropped out after T1 was 25.77, the difference with mean age of respondents to the full study being non-significant ($t = -.12, p = .26$).

Among the dropouts, 60% were male, 48% had prior professional experience and 65% had an academic degree. Chi-square tests indicated that these proportions did not differ significantly from the proportions within the group of respondents to the full study ($\chi^2 = 2.62, p > .05$ for sex, $\chi^2 = 2.75, p > .05$ for professional experience and $\chi^2 = 3.48, p > .05$ for educational degree).

Measures

Work values were measured at T1. The items used to measure work values are based on the international Values Scale developed by the Work Importance Study group (Coetsier & Claes, 1990; 1995; Super & Sverko, 1995). For our study we used a shortened version of the Flemish adaptation of this scale (Buyens, 1993; Coetsier & Claes, 1990; 1995). The original Flemish scale contains 105 items loading on 21 first-order factors and 4 second-order factors. The latter correspond to the four types of work values that are prevalent in many value scales (e.g. Dawis, 1991; Elizur *et al.*, 1991; Elizur & Sagie, 1999; Ross *et al.*, 1999). We have discussed them in the theoretical part of this paper: (1) *advancement*, (2) *autonomy*, (3) *economic rewards*, and (4) *group-orientedness*. Based upon a number of pilot studies (see De Vos, 2002; De Vos, Buyens & Schalk, 2001), the list of 105 items was reduced to 30 items loading directly on these four values.

Respondents were asked to indicate the importance they attach to each of the items listed, using a 5-point Likert scale ranging from (1) 'not at all important' to (5) 'to a great extent important'. The Advancement scale consisted of 9 items including to perform better than others, to be a leader at work, to develop your own career, to make decisions that are implemented by others, to be promoted, to have power over others. Alpha coefficient for this scale is .82. The scale measuring Autonomy consisted of 9 items including to live according to you own ideas, to realize your personal objectives, to determine your own working hours, to have a good balance between your work and private life (Alpha coefficient is .74). The scale measuring Economic Rewards consisted of 6 items including to have a good salary, to be well-paid, to know that you will always earn your bread (Alpha coefficient is .79). The scale measuring Group Orientation consisted of 6 items including to have contacts with other people at work, to have a job in which you can easily make friends, to have people around you who have time for a chat, to help other people at work. Alpha coefficient for this scale is .74.

Work Locus of Control was also measured at T1. In this study we used an adapted version of the locus of control scale originally developed by Levenson (1974; 1981). The 24 items included in the original scale were adapted to the work situation and were pretested in a number of pilot studies (see De Vos, 2002). Based on exploratory factor analysis and reliability analyses, 15 items were retained for inclusion in the final questionnaire. Respondents had to indicate to which extent they agree with each of the 15 statements using a 5-point Likert scale ranging from (1) = "not at all" to (5) = "to a very great extent". Some items were reverse-

scored such that a higher score on this scale refers to a higher degree of internal LOC. Alpha reliability was .79.

Contract-Related Information Seeking was measured at T2. Our measure of contract-related information seeking is based upon existing scales that have been developed within the socialization literature (Ashford, 1986; Morrison, 1993a; 1993b; Ostroff & Koslowski, 1992). The subject of information seeking were six types of employer inducements: (1) career development opportunities; (2) job content; (3) social atmosphere; (4) personal support; (5) financial rewards; (6) respect for private life. These inducements were selected based upon our review of psychological contract studies (e.g. Coyle-Shapiro & Kessler, 2000; Freese *et al.*, 1999; Herriot *et al.*, 1997; Rousseau, 1990; 1998). Subjects received a short description of these inducements and they were asked to indicate the frequency with which they had engaged in nine information-seeking activities in order to obtain more information about what they could expect from their employer regarding each inducement during the previous four-week period. These activities were selected based upon prior work by Ashford (1986) and Morrison (1993a; 1993b): (1) talk with your supervisor; (2) talk with your mentor; (3) talk with more senior colleagues; (4) talk with other new hires; (5) talk with senior managers; (6) talk with people from the HR-department; (7) observation of what others receive; (8) paying attention to what colleagues expect; (9) consultation of written material. All responses were on five-point scales (1 = *never*; 2 = *once or twice a month*; 3 = *once a week*; 4 = *a few times a week*; 5 = *almost daily*). For each type of employer inducements, the responses for the nine information-seeking activities were aggregated, in accordance with Ashford (1986) and Morrison (1993).

Control variables. In all analyses we controlled for the demographic characteristics age (years), sex (0 = male; 1 = female), highest educational degree (1 = high school; 2 = non-academic degree after high school; 3 = academic degree), and prior work experience (number of years) because these variables could affect the independent and/or dependent variables in our study. For instance, individuals can differ in their work values as a function of their life experiences (Coetsier & Claes, 1990; Schwartz, 1999; Super, 1995) or as a function of their sex (Sagie *et al.*, 1996; Super, 1995).

Socialization research suggests that socialization practices affect socialization outcomes as well as newcomer information seeking (Miller & Jablin, 1991; Saks & Ashforth, 1997). Therefore we decided to control for the existence of a formal orientation training for newcomers within the organization, during which they receive extensive information about different aspects of the organization and of their new employment relationship. Three of the

organizations involved in our study systematically organized such training (two consulting firms and one telecommunication firm). Within the other five organizations, newcomers were directly sent to their department or direct supervisor after entry, without participating in any orientation training. A dummy variable was used to indicate the existence of a formal orientation training for newcomers (0 = *no orientation training*; 1 = *orientation training*).

Analyses. In order to examine the proposed relationships, hierarchical multiple regression analyses were conducted. In step 1, all control variables were entered. In step 2, we entered the four work values and the work LOC measure. This was done separately for each of the 6 types of employer inducements about which information-seeking behavior was assessed.

RESULTS

Table 1 presents the means, standard deviations and intercorrelations between all the variables included in the study. As can be seen from this table, the frequency of contract-related information seeking is not very high in absolute terms. Newcomers generally search most frequently, i.e. about once a week, for information about their job content ($M = 3.02$).

Insert Table 1 About Here

This is followed by information seeking about social atmosphere ($M = 2.39$), personal support ($M = 2.27$), and career development ($M = 2.11$). They search least frequently for information about more work-extrinsic and material types of inducements, i.e. respect for private life ($M = 1.92$) and financial rewards ($M = 1.82$). For job content and social atmosphere, which are the content areas that are most closely related to socialization domains, these mean scores are comparable with technical, referent and social information seeking found prior socialization research (Morrison, 1993a; 1993b; Ostroff & Koslowski, 1992).

Relation between Work Values and Contract-Related Information Seeking

The results of the regression analyses are presented in Table 2. The proposed relationship between work values and the frequency of information seeking behaviors (ISB) is confirmed for most types of employer inducements.

Insert Table 2 About Here

Advancement (H1A). First, there is a significant and positive relationship between Advancement and ISB about Career Development ($b = .14, p < .01$) and Personal Support ($b = .17, p < .01$). These findings are in line with H1A. Contrary to our expectations, no significant relationship between Advancement and Job Content is found. Although this was not expected, there is also a significant and positive relationship between Advancement and information seeking about Social Atmosphere ($b = .12, p < .05$) and Financial Rewards ($b = .14, p < .01$). This implies that employees who value advancement in their career, not only tend to search more frequently for information about their career and about the support they receive from the organization, but also about other aspects of their employment relationship.

Autonomy (H1B). We expected that Autonomy would be negatively related to information seeking. The latter is confirmed for ISB relating to Career Development ($b = -.13, p < .01$) and Job Content ($b = -.10, p < .05$) but not for the other dimensions. This means that H1B is only partially confirmed.

Economic Rewards (H1C). We expected that individuals who value Economic Rewards would engage more frequently in ISB relating to Financial Rewards. This hypothesis is confirmed by the data. There is a significant positive relationship between the value Economic Rewards and ISB about Financial Rewards ($b = .13, p < .01$).

Group Orientation (H1D). Finally, we expected a positive relationship between Group Orientation and the frequency of ISB about the Social Atmosphere at Work. This proposition is confirmed by the data ($b = .15, p < .01$). In addition, the analyses also show that Group Orientation is a significant predictor of ISB about Respect for Private Life ($b = .09, p < .05$).

Together these results indicate that newcomers tend to pay more attention to information about those types of inducements that are more informative about the fulfillment of their work values.

Relation between Work Locus of Control and Contract-Related Information Seeking

As shown in Table 2, Internal LOC is positively related to ISB about Job Content ($b = .10, p < .01$). The other relationships are also positive but not significant, meaning that hypothesis 2 is only partially confirmed.

DISCUSSION

As to date, numerous studies have shown the importance of the psychological contract in explaining work-related attitudes and behaviors. However, our knowledge about the factors contributing to psychological contract formation, based on which employees subsequently evaluate their employment relationship, is still in a preliminary phase. With this study it was our aim to provide a first contribution to improving our understanding of how newcomers develop their psychological contract perceptions. More specifically, we examined newcomers' information-seeking behaviors about what they can expect of their organization during the first weeks after entry. Based upon previous research on the role of knowledge in psychological contract formation (Thomas & Anderson, 1998) and socialization research (Morrison, 1993a; 1993b; Ostroff & Koslowski, 1992) we proposed that newcomer information seeking is a relevant variable to be studied in order to increase our knowledge of psychological contract formation. More specifically, we assessed the impact of two types of individual characteristics (work values and work locus of control) on the frequency of newcomer information seeking about the psychological contract. These antecedent variables build on the two central groups of individual antecedents, values and personality style, which are considered as relevant individual antecedents of attitudes and behaviors in the workplace (e.g. Dawis & Lofquist, 1984).

Relationship between Work Values and Contract-Related Information Seeking

Taken together, our results provide a first indication that newcomers search for information about employer inducements to the extent that they perceive these inducements as a means for fulfilling their personal work values. More specifically, newcomers who value Advancement searched more frequently for information about career development opportunities and about the personal support they can expect from their employer. Newcomers who value Group Orientation, paid more attention to those aspects of their employment

relationship that are related to the work context (i.e. the social atmosphere and the balance between work and private life). The value Economic Rewards was positively related to information seeking about financial rewards. Finally, Autonomy was negatively related to information seeking about career development and job content but not to other types of employer inducements. In a general sense these findings support the proposition put forward within the literature on schema development that individuals are motivated to search for information that is consistent with their personal motives and goals (Fiske & Neuberg, 1990; Fiske & Taylor, 1984). They are also in line with socialization literature which states that newcomers search for information that is relevant for attaining their goals (Ashford, 1986; Louis, 1980) and with P-O fit literature which states that work values shape the ways in which employees perceive and evaluate their experiences within the workplace (Dawis & Lofquist, 1984; Kristof, 1996). Our results indicate that work values might shape employees' psychological contract perceptions and evaluations by focusing their information-seeking efforts to certain aspects of their employment relationship.

Relationship between Work Locus of Control and the Psychological Contract

We expected that newcomers with an internal LOC would pay more attention to seeking information about what they can expect of their employer because they feel more “in control” of actually attaining these inducements. Our results only partially confirm our hypothesis since only the relationship between LOC and information seeking about job content was significant. Further research is necessary in order to validate our findings and to find out whether LOC consistently has a differential effect on different content dimensions of contract-related information seeking. If this is confirmed, our finding would imply that internal LOC is predictive of that content area of the psychological contract that is most directly related to performance on the job, i.e. job content. It could be that internals first of all focus on this area because during the first weeks after entry this is the most important one in affecting their own contributions. It is possible that the relationship with information seeking about other psychological contract areas only becomes apparent several months after entry. This would imply that content dimensions are relevant to take into account when studying the impact of LOC on information seeking. Although these findings need further validation, they provide a first empirical indication that newcomers differ in their initial information-seeking activities as a function of their locus of control.

LOC theories state that LOC is positively related to employee proactivity because internals place a higher value on goal attainment and because they feel more in control to attain

these goals (Kren, 1992; Spector, 1982). The former means that work values would mediate the impact of LOC on information seeking. The latter means that LOC would moderate the impact of work values on information seeking, i.e. the impact of work values on information seeking would be stronger for those individuals with a high internal LOC. Following the guidelines for moderator and mediator analyses provided by Baron & Kenny (1986), we conducted additional analyses to assess the possible mediating or moderating role of LOC¹. However, the results of these analyses provide no evidence for these more complex relationships between LOC, work values and information seeking.

Overall, our results suggest that the individual characteristics included in our study do have a unique effect on contract-related information seeking. The amount of variance explained and the effect sizes of the standardized β -coefficients, however, were rather small which might suggest that the results are not practically significant. An explanation for this is that information seeking is most likely motivated by a variety of factors and not solely by newcomers' work values and locus of control. These probably include other individual factors such as pre-entry expectations, careerism, self-confidence or self-efficacy (e.g. Judge & Bono, 2001; Mowday, Porter & Steers, 1982; Rousseau, 1990), as well as organizational factors like mentoring, passively provided information, and organizational culture (e.g. Miller & Jablin, 1991; Saks & Ashforth, 1997). Despite these relatively small effects, the results of this study are important in that they provide one of the first empirical indications that individual characteristics are relevant for explaining contract-related information seeking. In order to increase the practical relevance of our results, a task for future research will be to build on this study and focus on the joint effects of a wide range of factors affecting contract-related information seeking, both those situated at the individual and those situated at the organizational level.

Our findings about contract-related information seeking support the recent focus on newcomer proactivity within the socialization literature. They demonstrate that the proactive role of newcomers also holds for information seeking relating to the psychological contract. This supports the notion of psychological contract formation as an active process of sensemaking. The mean scores for information seeking obtained in this study suggest that newcomers most frequently search for information about inducements relating to their job content, followed by social atmosphere and personal support. These types of inducements are most closely related to those content domains of socialization information, i.e. technical and social information, which are presumed to be most predictive of newcomer adjustment

¹ We thank the anonymous reviewer who gave us the suggestion to analyze these alternative relationships

(Morrison, 1993a; 1993b; Ostroff & Koslowski, 1997; Saks & Ashforth, 1997). They also relate to the types of socialization knowledge, i.e. social and role knowledge, affecting psychological contract changes in the study conducted by Thomas & Anderson (1998). This finding supports the idea that insights developed within the socialization literature are highly relevant for studying psychological contract formation. It suggests that during the initial stage of the employment relationship newcomers are mainly concerned with gathering those types of information which are most helpful for them to become adjusted within the organization. It is possible that information seeking about the other content areas of the psychological contract considered in our study (career development, financial rewards, and respect for private life) only becomes apparent in a later stage of the employment relationship. An important task for future research will be to examine the relative prominence of information seeking about different content areas of the psychological contract during different stages of the employment relationship. In this sense, it is also relevant for future research to address changes in information seeking over time. If future research shows that the focus of information seeking changes during different stages of the employment relationship, this would mean that psychological contract development cannot be described as one holistic process, but that it is important to take into account the differences between content areas. On the other hand, if job content, social atmosphere and personal support continue to be the content domains about which employees most frequently seek for information, this would question the discriminant validity between the psychological contract and socialization content domains.

In this study we only addressed contract-related information seeking as an outcome variable. We hereby departed from the assumption that this type of information seeking is relevant because it relates to psychological contract formation. However, the latter relationship was not empirically assessed. Therefore it is important for future research to address the impact of information seeking on psychological contract development. We expect that newcomers who search more frequently for information about their psychological contract information, might develop more realistic expectations which are better in line with what their employer can actually offer them. This, in turn, should have a positive impact on newcomers' evaluations of psychological contract fulfillment over time. In this respect it is also important to study changes in newcomers' psychological contracts in relationship with changes in information seeking, using longitudinal research designs. This type of studies could also provide more insight into the bi-directional relationship between information seeking and the psychological contract. For instance, it is possible that newcomers' intermediate psychological contract evaluations affect changes in their information-seeking behaviors.

This study was conducted within Belgian-based organizations, using a sample of Flemish respondents. Although the relative importance of values has been found to differ between cultures or nationalities (e.g. Schwartz & Sagie, 2000) we can expect that this will not affect their impact on information seeking. It might imply, however, that due to differences in the relative importance of work values newcomers in other countries might pay more attention to obtaining information about other dimensions of the psychological contract than those prevalent in our sample.

Limitations

There are a two types of limitations to this study that should be noted. First, we only used self-report measures. A potential problem when assessing information seeking through self-report measures is that respondents may fail to report their behaviors accurately and that variables are correlated because of common method bias. We have tried to reduce common method bias by measuring independent and dependent variables at different data collection waves. However, the significant positive correlations between the four work values at the first wave and between the six content dimensions of information seeking at the second wave could be an indication of common method variance. Therefore it is important for future research to supplement self-reports with data from other sources (e.g. supervisors or peers, or objective data about the frequency of consulting written information).

A second limitation relates to the practical significance of our findings. As stated above, the effect sizes in our study are small and this suggests that other important antecedents have been omitted. Therefore future research should include other antecedents, both at the individual and organizational level. Taking into account the organizational level is also important because the relationships assessed in this paper could interact with organizational variables, e.g. promises conveyed by recruiters. Although we controlled for the existence of formal socialization procedures in our analyses, this factor needs further attention in subsequent research since socialization activities organized by the firm could affect newcomers' information-seeking behaviors. For instance, newcomers receiving extensive information about what they can expect of their employment relationship might be less inclined to search for additional information. Also it is possible that organizations differ in the extent to which they actively stimulate or reinforce information seeking by their newcomers.

Implications

Despite its limitations, this study has a number of practical implications. First, we would recommend that employers attend to newcomers' information-seeking activities regarding their psychological contracts from the initial stage of the employment relationship onwards and that they complement newcomer proactivity with the provision of information. This should encourage the development of a realistic and desirable psychological contract (Thomas & Anderson, 1998). Second, the results suggest that employers should attempt to understand what employees value in their work setting and how this affects their search for information about what they can expect from their employer. By actively paying attention to these personal motives, employers should be able to avoid the development of purely idiosyncratic psychological contracts which lack correspondence with organizational reality. Frequent communication about both the employee's and the employer's wants and offers is therefore important and should receive permanent attention during the course of the employment relationship. Third, our findings also suggest that work LOC affects the frequency with which newcomers search for information relating to their job content. Although this finding needs further validation, for employers it implies that they should take into account the existence of individual differences in LOC and how this affects the frequency of newcomer information seeking. Employers should be aware that, at least for job-related information, newcomers with an external LOC will depend much more on passively received information, while internals will show greater levels of proactivity. Taking this type of individual differences into account when providing job-related information can be important in order for employers to ensure that both groups of newcomers can start off with comparable information.

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TABLE 1

Means, Standarddeviations and Intercorrelations between Variables Included in the Study

Variable	Mean	S.D.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15
1. Age	26.12	5.32															
2. Sex (0=male; 1=female)	n.a.	n.a.	.03														
3. Collective socialization practices	n.a.	n.a.	-.10**	.13**													
4. Years experience	3.22	5.51	.04**	.05	-.13**												
5. Degree	n.a.	n.a.	.04	-.05	.04	-.14**											
6. Advancement	3.59	.52	-.01	-.04	.19**	-.04	.09*										
7. Autonomy	3.98	.46	.10**	.04	-.08**	.11**	-.07	.22**									
8. Economic Rewards	3.83	.61	-.03	.02	.02	.04	-.31**	.18**	.35**								
9. Group Orientation	3.75	.52	-.12**	.12*	.11**	-.09*	-.16**	.27**	.31**	.30**							
10. Internal LOC	4.80	.42	-.14**	-.02	.13**	-.14**	-.03	.07	-.02	-.11**	.02						
11. ISB Career Development T2	2.11	.66	-.27**	.05	.15**	-.26**	-.02	.16**	-.08	.10*	.11*	.02					
12. ISB Support T2	2.27	.66	-.17**	.10*	.07	-.16**	-.11*	.18**	.01	.07	.14**	.02	.60**				
13. ISB Job Content T2	3.02	.64	-.12**	.02	.05	-.13**	-.06	.05	-.07	.05	.07	.11**	.43**	.48**			
14. ISB Social Atmosphere T2	2.39	.67	-.14**	.16**	.09	-.13**	-.11*	.16**	.02	.11*	.21**	.05	.59**	.66**	.56**		
15. ISB Financial Rewards T2	1.82	.61	-.23**	-.01	.11*	-.20**	-.18**	.17**	-.01	.21**	.14**	.02	.62**	.61**	.35**	.54**	
16. ISB Respect for Private Life T2	1.92	.64	-.12**	.06	.09*	-.12**	-.06	.12**	.09*	.12**	.16**	-.01	.52**	.63**	.40**	.59**	.63**

* $p < .05$

** $p < .01$

$N = 527$

TABLE 2

Hierarchical Regressions for the Impact of Individual Differences on Frequency of Contract-Related Information Seeking¹

Outcomes:	ISB Career Development		ISB Personal Support		ISB Job Content		ISB Social Atmosphere		ISB Financial Rewards		ISB Respect for Private Life	
	1	2	1	2	1	2	1	2	1	2	1	2
Predictors:												
Step 1:												
Age	-.20**	-.19**	-.14*	-.12*	-.12*	-.09	-.08	-.06	-.18**	-.16**	-.09	-.08
Sex (dummy)	-.04	-.05	-.09*	-.09*	-.02	-.02	-.15**	-.14**	.03	.03	-.05	-.04
Degree	-.03	-.01	-.10*	-.10*	-.06	-.04	-.10*	-.08	-.19**	-.16**	-.06	-.03
Socialization	.12**	.10*	.05	.02	.04	.01	.07	.03	.10*	.07	.08	.07
Years Experience	-.09	-.08	-.040	-.04	.00	.01	-.08	-.08	-.05	-.05	-.04	-.05
Step 2:												
Advancement		.14**		.17**		.05		.12**		.14**		.06
Autonomy		-.13**		-.04		-.10*		-.06		-.08		.04
Economic Rewards		.08		-.01		.05		.04		.13**		.05
Group Orientation		.05		.07		.05		.15**		.04		.09*
Internal LOC		-.03		-.01		.10*		.02		-.02		-.02
<i>F</i>	10.73**	7.66**	5.35**	4.62**	2.07*	2.10**	6.78**	6.01**	10.72**	8.03**	2.95*	2.94**
Change in <i>F</i>		4.24**		3.74**		2.10*		4.98**		4.94**		2.88*
Adjusted <i>R</i> ² .	.09	.11	.04	.07	.02	.04	.05	.09	.09	.12	.02	.04
<i>R</i> ² Change		.04		.03		.02		.04		.04		.03

* *p* < .05

** *p* < .01

¹ Standardized β -coefficients are used