‘Possunt, quia posse videntur’: They can because they think they can. Development and validation of the Work Self-Efficacy scale: Evidence from two studies☆,☆☆,☆☆☆

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ABSTRACT

Self-efficacy (SE) has been recognised as a pervasive mechanism of human agency influencing motivation, performance and well-being. In the organisational literature, it has been mainly assessed in relation to job tasks, leaving the emotional and interpersonal domains quite unexplored, despite their relevance. We aim to fill this gap by presenting a multidimensional work self-efficacy (W-SE) scale that assesses employees' perceived capability to manage tasks (task SE), negative emotions in stressful situations (negative emotional SE), and their conduct in social interactions, in terms of both defending their own point of view (assertive SE) and understanding others' states and needs (empathic SE). Results from two independent studies (Study 1, N = 2192 employees; Study 2, N = 700 employees) adopting both variable- and person-centred approaches support the validity of the scale. Findings of factor analyses suggest a bi-factor model positing a global W-SE factor and four specific W-SEs, which are invariant across gender and career stages. Multiple regressions show that global W-SE is associated with all considered criteria, task SE is associated positively with in-role behaviours and negatively with counterproductive behaviours; negative emotional SE is negatively associated with negative emotions and health-related symptoms; empathic SE is positively associated with extra-role behaviour; and, unexpectedly, assertive SE is positively associated with counterproductive work behaviour. However, results from a Latent Profile Analysis showed that the relationship between the SEs and criteria is complex, and that W-SE dimensions combine into different patterns, identifying four SE configurations associated with different levels of adjustment.

1. Introduction

From a social cognitive theoretical perspective, self-efficacy (SE), defined as ‘people's beliefs in their capability to exercise some measure of control over their own functioning and over environmental events’ (Bandura, 2001, p. 10), is a key variable to study how
people manage themselves and their behaviour at work. Indeed, SE has been recognised as the most central and pervasive mechanism of human agency, influencing motivation, well-being and personal achievement and fulfillment.

Bandura (2006) highlighted that ‘the efficacy beliefs system is not a global trait but a differentiated set of self-beliefs linked to distinct realm of functioning’ (p. 307). Hence, SE should be operationalised considering the range of capabilities (e.g. task-related, emotional, interpersonal), which is particularly relevant in the context under study. As suggested by Bandura (1997), focusing attention mainly on one SE dimension may result in a partial understanding of how the human self-regulatory system operates and affects employees’ performance, adaptive behaviour and well-being. Since employees must not only complete tasks but also manage their emotions and interpersonal relationships, the adoption of a multidimensional approach when assessing SE at work would be pivotal. The relevance of considering emotional and interpersonal domains, in addition to cognitive ones related to the management of tasks, is consistent with the broader literature on competence and intelligence, which has extended its theoretical models integrating these three domains (Boyatzis, 2008; Goleman, 1995, 2006).

The multidimensional approach would be also relevant considering that people’s beliefs about their capabilities are not stable, as suggested by career literature (e.g., Klassen & Chiu, 2011; Maurer, 2001; Tschanzen-Moran & Woolfolk Hoy, 2007), and that employees have to face different task-related, emotional and interpersonal challenges over their career and during transition periods. Indeed, their self-beliefs are likely to change as a consequence of dynamic processes of gains and losses (Baltes, 1987), of the feedback received from the environment and of reappraisal processes (Bandura, 1997). Hence, a scale capable of assessing, in a valid and reliable way, different work-related SEs throughout the professional stages would be a further asset.

However, while the multidimensional approach when assessing SE has been adopted in other psychological fields (e.g. education, development and personality), this is not the case in the organisational context. Indeed, in this setting measures developed within Bandura’s theory generally operationalised SE only in relation to more or less specific job tasks, leaving the role of other domains (e.g. emotional and interpersonal) quite unexplored, despite their relevance for employees’ performance and well-being (e.g. Hayes, 2002; Kim, Cable, Kim, & Wang, 2009).

The aim of this research is to present and validate a multidimensional work-SE (henceforth W-SE) scale, to assess individuals’ efficacy beliefs in four self-regulatory capabilities: task, negative emotional, empathic and assertive W-SEs. We conducted two studies, which integrate the variable-oriented and the person-oriented approaches (Bergman & Wangby, 2014), to investigate the potential benefits of adopting this multidimensional approach. In particular, the research objects are:

- to investigate the factorial structure of the W-SE scale and test its invariance across gender and career stages (Study 1);
- to investigate the criterion validity of the W-SE scale by exploring the association of each SE dimension with in-role, extra-role and counterproductive work behaviours, negative emotions, and health-related symptoms (Study 2);
- to investigate the incremental validity of the specific SE dimensions against a global SE factor in relation to various criteria (Study 2);
- to further investigate the validity of the W-SE scale by examining whether it is possible to identify groups characterised by different SE configurations and exploring whether and how these configurations are differently associated with the aforementioned criteria as well as gender and career stages (Study 2).

In the following section, after providing a review of the literature on SE in the organisational context and across different psychological fields, we detail the rationale guiding the inclusion of the four chosen SE dimensions over others. We acknowledge that the work context is extremely complex and requires individuals to put into play a wide variety of self-regulatory capabilities. However, rather than attempting to include all possible specific dimensions, we opted to identify a sub-set of self-regulatory capabilities that are: (1) related to different domains of self-regulation, including behavioural, emotional and interpersonal; and (2) rooted in well-established theoretical frameworks.

The multidimensional approach adopted to develop the W-SE scale has the advantage of providing a nuanced and comprehensive picture of individuals’ beliefs on their capabilities. Assessing only one self-regulatory capability (e.g. task-related) may indeed result in partial understanding. In line with Bandura (1997, 2006), it is important to explore SE beliefs in different self-regulatory capabilities to investigate how they are combined with each other and to understand how individuals orchestrate them to fulfil their goals and manage themselves in challenging and demanding situations. Indeed, an employee may perceive themselves as highly efficacious in accomplishing tasks but less efficacious in managing negative emotions associated with demanding and conflict situations. Similarly, two employees may perceive themselves as equally efficacious in accomplishing tasks but quite differently efficacious in empathising with others or in defending their own opinions and rights.

This multidimensional approach has practical implications since management and HR could use the scale to gain an all-round understanding of their employees over the course of their career by providing a valid and reliable tool to assess and monitor individuals’ beliefs in relation to different self-regulatory capabilities. Consequently, this may result in tailoring interventions and trainings aimed at strengthening individual resources.

1.1. The rationale for the multidimensional W-SE scale

The assessment of SE in a variety of domains of functioning has been commonly adopted in educational, developmental and personality psychology, while it has been quite rare, if not absent, within the organisational literature. Indeed, in this context, SE has been mainly operationalised in terms of employees’ belief about their capability to manage and accomplish work-related tasks. More in details, while some authors have investigated employees’ SE beliefs in relation to narrow tasks (e.g. Cinnamon, 2006; Sullivan,
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