



Organizational and occupational commitment in relation to bridge employment and retirement intentions

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ABSTRACT

Understanding the antecedents to retirement and bridge employment is important to older-aged adults who seek ways to smoothly transition to full retirement, and to organizations that benefit from retaining their highly skilled and most experienced workers, especially in occupations for which labor shortages are projected. We tested the effects of affective, continuance, and normative commitment to organizations and to occupations on older-aged pharmacists' ($N = 294$) intentions to fully retire and to pursue three types of bridge employment. As hypothesized, criteria that were more organizationally focused (e.g., bridge employment in the same organization) were predicted more strongly by organizational, rather than occupational, commitment. For one type of bridge employment that was more occupationally focused—bridge employment in a different field—the hypothesized differential effects were supported, such that it was predicted more strongly by occupational, rather than organizational, commitment. We discuss the implications of our findings for theory, research, and practice.

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Researchers have shown considerable interest in understanding employees' decisions to voluntarily retire (e.g., Feldman, 1994), and for good reason. Many organizations, even during times of economic recession, are expecting talent shortages as their older-aged employees retire and withdraw from paid work entirely (Johnson, Mermin, & Resseger, 2007; Toossi, 2004). Retirement is not, however, merely a single event that separates engagement in paid work from exclusive engagement in non-paid activities; rather, retirement can be viewed as a process (Beehr, 1986). As individuals transition into full retirement—the complete withdrawal from paid employment—they often take multiple pathways (Beehr & Adams, 2003; Szinovacz, 2003; Topa, Moriano, Depolo, Alcover, & Morales, 2009; Wang, 2007), including the pursuit of what has been labeled “bridge employment.”

Bridge employment refers to a pattern of employment taken by older-aged adults to bridge between their career jobs and full retirement (Doeringer, 1990; Weckerle & Shultz, 1999). Most people pursue bridge employment outside of their chosen profession, typically taking a part-time job or other temporary employment prior to permanent retirement (Feldman, 1994; Shultz, 2003). However, some individuals pursue bridge employment within the same occupation, and even in the same position at their current organization, by reducing the number of hours they work (Raymo, Liang, Sugisawa, Kobayashi, & Sugihara, 2004).

Bridge employment among older-aged workers has become quite common, and its occurrence is expected to increase (Cahill, Giandrea, & Quinn, 2006; Johnson, Kawachi, & Lewis, 2009). Older-aged adults work for various reasons, including the need for income and desire for social interaction (Mor-Barak, 1995), and bridge employment offers a means of “easing” into retirement without fully forgoing the benefits of employment (Cahill et al., 2006). Indeed, bridge employment is associated with retirees' psychological well-being (Wang, 2007), retirement and life satisfaction (Kim & Feldman, 2000), and positive health-related outcomes (Zhan, Wang, Liu, & Shultz, 2009). Organizations can benefit from understanding how highly skilled older-aged employees can be retained through increasing the likelihood that these workers pursue bridge employment in their current positions and retire fully at a later time, rather than deciding to retire earlier or pursuing bridge employment in another field. From

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a societal perspective, about two-thirds of older-aged workers who change their jobs also change their occupations (Johnson et al., 2009), which may contribute to a shortage of skilled workers in industries of societal importance, such as healthcare. As such, promoting bridge employment within the same occupation may help address projected labor shortages, including shortages in the pharmacy profession (Knapp & Cultice, 2007), which was our focus in this study.

While researchers have shown considerable interest in retirement and, more recently, in bridge employment, there is surprisingly little research on the roles of organizational and occupational commitment in these phenomena. Commitment is a psychological force that binds an individual to a course of action related to some target, such as when an individual wants to remain a member of an organization or occupation (Meyer & Herscovitch, 2001). As such, commitment has important implications for employees' decisions about ending or continuing their organizational affiliations (Meyer & Allen, 1991). Commitment comprises three components that apply to various targets, including organizations and occupations (Meyer, Allen, & Smith, 1993). This three-component model provides theoretical reasons why organizational and occupational commitment might relate to older-aged employees' employment and retirement-related intentions; however, these relationships have not yet been tested.

In this study, we integrated aspects of commitment theory (Meyer & Herscovitch, 2001) with theories that are applied to retirement (e.g., role theory; Ashforth, 2001) and examined the relationships between commitment to organizations and to occupations with intentions to fully retire and to pursue three types of bridge employment. Our study contributes to the literatures on retirement, bridge employment, and commitment in several ways. First, despite the importance of bridge employment to older-aged workers, organizations, and society, scholars have noted that research on this topic is still in its early stages (Wang & Shultz, 2010; Wang, Zhan, Liu, & Shultz, 2008). We contribute to this literature in several ways, as we soon describe.

Second, as others have recognized (Beehr, Glazer, Nielson, & Farmer, 2000; Griffin & Hesketh, 2008; von Bonsdorff, Shultz, Leskinen, & Tansky, 2009), research on bridge employment has focused on demographic and socioeconomic variables, with relatively little research on organization and job-related perceptions. This is unfortunate given the likelihood that job experiences might push older-aged employees toward pursuing retirement and bridge employment at an earlier or later point in time (Beehr et al., 2000). Bridge employment scholars have recommended that other job-related psychological variables be examined in future research, including organizational commitment and career-based attachments (Wang et al., 2008). Moreover, commitment theory (Meyer & Herscovitch, 2001) and theories used in retirement research (role theory: Ashforth, 2001; continuity theory: Atchley, 1989) share conceptual similarities and are, hence, well-suited for theoretical integration.

A third contribution of our study is that we examine multiple variables related to retirement and bridge employment within the same study. Researchers tend to focus on predicting a single role-transition variable rather than predicting multiple variables for which the nomological nets may differ (Blau, 2000), as demonstrated by research on bridge employment (e.g., von Bonsdorff et al., 2009; Wang et al., 2008). We tested hypotheses about the relative strengths of the effects of organizational versus occupational commitment on criteria that are either more organizationally or occupationally focused.

Fourth, researchers have distinguished between two types of bridge employment that we examined in this study: career bridge employment (i.e., bridge employment in the same industry or career-related field) and bridge employment in a different field (e.g., Shultz, 2003). The antecedents to these types of bridge employment are poorly understood, yet such knowledge is needed to inform policies and strategies designed to extend the work lives of older-aged adults in their chosen occupations (von Bonsdorff et al., 2009; Wang et al., 2008).

Fifth, we extend research on bridge employment by examining a third type that is important, yet understudied—transitioning to full retirement by working fewer hours in the same position in one's current organization. Understanding this type of bridge employment is of theoretical interest, as we later describe, and is critically important to organizations that wish to extend the tenure of their retirement-aged employees, rather than losing their most experienced workers through full retirement, bridge employment in the same occupation but in a different organization, or bridge employment in a different field.

Finally, while not the focus of our study, our findings contribute to the literature on commitment. For instance, research on how different components of occupational commitment relate to employment and retirement-related variables is scarce, which is unfortunate because occupations are increasingly meaningful to people as their educational levels rise and their work becomes more specialized (Lee, Carswell, & Allen, 2000).

Bridge employment: prior research and theoretical perspectives

Early research on bridge employment focused on the roles of demographic and socioeconomic variables, including some studies in which a few job characteristics were also examined. For instance, Weckerle and Shultz (1999) found that older workers who wanted to continue their bridge employment tended to be more satisfied with their current financial situation and were working in more flexible jobs. Kim and Feldman (2000) found that retirees pursued more bridge employment when they were relatively younger and in good health, and had longer job tenure, a working spouse, and dependent children. More recently, researchers have sought to understand the antecedents to different types of bridge employment (e.g., von Bonsdorff et al., 2009), including one recent study that examined older-aged individuals' perceptions of their work environment in their pre-retirement jobs.

Studying a representative sample of individuals between the ages of 51 and 61, Wang et al. (2008) examined the potential antecedents of career bridge employment, bridge employment in a different field, and full retirement. Their results showed that older-aged adults were more likely to engage in career bridge employment than fully retire when they were younger, more educated, healthier, and, importantly for the present study's purpose, when they experienced less job-related stress and had higher job satisfaction in their pre-retirement jobs. Retirees who experienced less job stress and had higher job satisfaction in their pre-retirement jobs were also more likely to engage in career bridge employment than bridge employment in some other field,

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