



## Young workers' job self-efficacy and affect: Pathways to health and performance<sup>☆</sup>

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### Abstract

This longitudinal study of 195 young workers responds to calls for the study of healthy work at discrete life stages. Based on social cognitive and affective events theories and using structural equation modeling, results indicated that both perceived job self-efficacy and job-related affect fully mediate the relationship between interpersonal work conflict at time 1 and the outcomes of job performance and health at time 2. Furthermore, job-related affect mediates the relationship between intrinsic job characteristics at time 1 and job performance and health at time 2. Finally, young workers' job performance at time 2 was directly predicted by perceptions of intrinsic work quality at time 1. Practical implications of these findings and suggestions for future research are also discussed.

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*Keywords:* Young workers; Work quality; Health; Job performance

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## 1. Introduction

About one-third of U.S. post-secondary institutions now have co-op programs (Sovilla, 1998). Co-op education is believed to: enhance career identity and planning, improve employment opportunities and short-term career progress, increase future salaries, create a sense of identity, and improve academic achievement (Howard & England-Kennedy, 2001; Waryszak, 1999). Public support for co-op work is increasing (e.g., some areas have mandated it for all interested high school students; Provincial Partnership Council, 2002). However, most research to date compares co-op and non-co-op students, and does not compare differences in outcomes due to the quality of co-op work experiences. Compared to other young workers, co-op workers may be more psychologically invested in their work as they “try on” potential careers. Consequently, negative experiences at this point may be particularly detrimental and jeopardize future opportunities.

The present study explored common psychological pathways between intrinsic job characteristics and interpersonal conflict on one hand, and job performance and health on the other. In contrast to much of the atheoretical literature on young and non-standard workers, we build on theoretical models of job self-efficacy (Bandura, 1986, 1997) and job-related affect (Brief & Weiss, 2002; Weiss & Cropanzano, 1996) as psychosocial mediators of these relationships.

### *1.1. Predictors of health and performance: Intrinsic job characteristics and interpersonal conflict as indicators of job quality*

*Job quality* is critical to successful job performance, psychological and physical health among adult workers (Tetrick & Quick, 2003). If certain features are present in a job, employees are motivated to perform well because individual needs for accomplishment, learning, and personal development are met (Hackman & Oldham, 1980). Among workers in their mid-twenties, intrinsic job characteristics have been related to both job satisfaction and commitment (Saks, 1995) as well as outcomes up to 10 months later (e.g., intentions to quit; Ashforth, Saks, & Lee, 1998).

Schwartz and Stone (1993) identified another important predictor of job outcomes finding that 75% of all work-related events perceived as harmful were related to negative social interactions. However, the study of workplace *interpersonal conflict* has been neglected (de Jonge, Reuvers, Houtman, & Kompier, 2000). Interestingly, the original job characteristics theory discussed above suggested that interactions with coworkers and supervisors are an important influence on employee outcomes (Oldham, 1996). Among adult workers, interpersonal conflict is positively correlated with anxiety, depression, and physical health symptoms, and negatively correlated with supervisor ratings of job performance (Spector & Jex, 1998). Weitzman (2001) argued that young workers are at particular risk for interpersonal conflict, and researchers have found that college educated youth often feel inept at handling work-related interpersonal conflicts (Volkema & Bergmann, 1995). Interpersonal conflict as an indicator of job quality is particularly relevant here, because as Garavan and Murphy (2001) have noted, co-op education involves a socialization process; including job characteristics, feedback, and supervisory and peer relationships.

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