Abstract

Much of the responsibility for managing careers is shifting from employers to adaptive and proactive employees. A career management intervention based on action regulation theory trained 205 white collar employees to engage actively in their own career building by increasing their self-knowledge, career goal commitment, and career plan quality. As hypothesized, these three variables were positively related to subsequent career self-management behaviors, which led both directly and indirectly to career satisfaction almost 10 months after the intervention. Self-management career interventions based within an employing organization appear feasible.

Keywords: Action regulation theory; Career development; Self-management behaviors; Career satisfaction; Intervention; Evaluation; Career building

1. Introduction

With the changing nature of jobs (Bridges, 1995) and the concept of the protean career (Hall, 1996, 2004), there has been a shift of the responsibility for careers from employers to

Some of these data were presented at the August 2005 meeting of the Academy of Management in Honolulu.
employees (Arnold, 2001) and a call for people to be proactive regarding their careers (Sei-
bert, Crant, & Kraimer, 1999), which requires a high degree of personal initiative (Frese &
Fay, 2001). In this paper we present a model explaining how employees can self-manage
their careers within a single organization and how the organization can aid their self-man-
agement. We test the model with a quasi-experimental design using an intervention based
on the concept of personal initiative (Frese & Fay, 2001). An action theory framework
based on personal initiative served as a basis for developing the intervention content
and process (self-regulation).

The goal of this study is to expand knowledge on the relation of individuals’ control of
their careers by addressing the following two issues. First, an action-theory based model
attempts to explain how employees enhance control over their own careers by engaging
in different activities that increase career self-management. Second, the role and impor-
tance of active career self-management for career building are clarified.

In action regulation theory, control means that individuals steer their own activities in
correspondence with some goal (Frese & Zapf, 1994). Self-regulation theory argues that
people’s transactions with the environment “enable an individual to guide his/her goal-di-
rected activities over time and across changing circumstances” (Karoly, 1993; see also
Vohs & Baumeister, 2004). Interventions to apply self-regulation theory aim at enhanced
control and self-regulation, and they have been effective for very specific, short-term
employee behaviors such as job attendance (Frayne & Latham, 1987; Latham & Frayne,
1989), reduction of problematic workplace behaviors (Godat & Brigham, 1999), and sales
(Frayne & Geringer, 2000). Evidence about interventions to attain more complex, longer-
term goals (e.g., career building) is lacking.

Self-regulation theory is based on the idea that goals, plans and feedback are relevant
parameters for regulating one’s actions (Carver & Scheier, 1982; Frese & Sabini, 1985;
Hacker, 1985). An action sequence (Frese & Zapf, 1994) consists of the following steps:
Goals, information collection, planning, execution, and feedback. People monitor their
environments, gathering information to aid in planning a course of action. As a result
of goals and information, they develop plans. Executing the plan means to actively influ-
ence the environment on one’s behalf, and the results are feedback regarding one’s actions.
Thus, personal initiative, characterized by people being self-starting, proactive and persis-
tent in the face of barriers (Frese, Kring, Soose, & Zempel, 1996), serves as the underlying
foundation for this study’s intervention.

We begin by developing two models to apply action theory to career self-management. The
first model (Fig. 1a) explains how a career-focused intervention based on action regulation the-
ory increases career self-management through self-knowledge and goal commitment, which
affect plan quality. The second model (Fig. 1b) explains how implementation of active career
self-management behaviors affects career satisfaction, directly or through feedback variables
from the organizational environment. The term feedback in action theory refers to stimuli that
the person can interpret as information about the action. This can be either information on the
process of action within the acting person (e.g., proprioceptive feedback), given by other people
(e.g., in the sense of receiving a smile, when one has told a joke), by the objective environment
(e.g., receiving a pay raise), or by a feedback intervention (when other people give me informa-
tion on my actions so that I can learn from it). The models are tested in a longitudinal field qua-
si-experiment over a period of more than 9 months.

The study was conducted at a global technology organization headquartered in Ger-
many that spans different industries. Its strong company culture relies on performance man-
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