

The impact of superior–subordinate relationships on the commitment, job satisfaction, and performance of virtual workers

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Abstract

While superior–subordinate relationships are expected to have a salient impact on individual work outcomes, the extant research has primarily focused on individuals working in a traditional work mode. Given the increasing popularity of virtual work arrangements, especially among professional-level employees, we examine the extent to which working in a virtual mode moderates the impact of leader–member exchange (LMX) quality on level of commitment, job satisfaction and performance. Based on a survey of 375 professional-level employees who worked to varying degrees virtually, we found that those with high quality relationships, who also worked extensively in this mode, demonstrated the highest levels of commitment, job satisfaction and performance relative to those who worked less extensively in this mode. Whereas those with lower quality relationships, who worked extensively in the virtual mode, demonstrated lower commitment and job satisfaction, but performed somewhat better, than those who worked a limited amount in this mode.

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Virtual work, involving the performance of work assignments away from the traditional office using computer technology, has become a common work arrangement for over 28 million workers in the U.S. (ITAC, 2002) and is practiced world-wide (Guimaraes & Dallow, 1999; Haddon & Lewis, 1994). These workers generally choose to allocate their work time between multiple remote locations in addition to spending a portion of their week in the traditional office (Madsen, 2003; Nilles, 1994). While initially this work mode was restricted to clerical or home-based workers, with recent technological advances professional-level employees have been given the opportunity to work virtually, with some major corporations permitting most of their employees the option of working at least a portion of every workweek in this mode (Baruch, 2001; Cummings, 2005). Over the past decade, the popular press, along with practitioners and a growing number of scholars, has embraced this voluntary work mode as a means of enhancing performance, job satisfaction and commitment. Unfortunately, much of the evidence to date to support this claim is anecdotal and speculative, with scant theoretical or empirical research conducted (Bailey & Kurland, 2002; DeSanctis

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& Monge, 1999; Staples, Hulland, & Higgins, 1999). This is especially surprising, since this popular work mode could alter the very nature of the bond between individuals and their organizations, as virtual workers are trusted to perform their jobs with little direct supervisory contact (Wiesenfeld, Raghuram, & Garud, 2001).

While researchers have studied the quality of superior–subordinate relationships, in particular leader–member exchange (LMX), and have linked it to important work outcomes, they have not done so in a virtual work context. Indeed, despite calls to the contrary in recent LMX literature reviews (e.g. Gerstner & Day, 1997; Liden, Sparrowe, & Wayne, 1997), research examining moderators of the impact of LMX on work outcomes has been generally lacking. Research on the virtual work context has also been scant with most of the emphasis on comparisons between virtual and non-virtual workers (e.g. Crossman & Burton, 1993; Fritz, Narasimhan, & Rhee, 1998; Igarria & Guimaraes, 1999), and generally this research has thus far not investigated professional-level employees (Baruch, 2001). Moreover, in making such comparisons previous research has categorized workers as either virtual or non-virtual and has not recognized that many individuals spend varying combinations of in-office and out-of-office time, resulting in many workers engaging in a virtual work mode to varying degrees (Apgar, 1998; Feldman & Gaine, 1997). With few exceptions (e.g. Wiesenfeld, Raghuram, & Garud, 1999), the literature investigating virtual work has failed to account for how extensively individuals work in this mode, which could help explain the wide-ranging and inconclusive findings thus far (Bailey & Kurland, 2002).

Our focus, therefore, is on understanding how LMX's impact on work outcomes is influenced by the degree of virtual work. In contrast to most other studies of virtual workers, we focus specifically on professional-level employees, since this type of worker has not often been studied in the virtual work literature and working virtually represents unique relational challenges in terms of accomplishing one's job. Building on the underpinnings of LMX theory, i.e. social exchange theory (Blau, 1964), and the literature on virtual work (e.g. Bailey & Kurland, 2002; Wiesenfeld et al., 1999), we propose that the degree of virtual work moderates the link between LMX quality and organizational commitment, job satisfaction and performance. Given the inherent interactional nature of LMX quality (Liden et al., 1997), and the increasing difficulties associated with maintaining relationships in a virtual work context (Cooper & Kurland, 2002), we expect that the quality of this exchange relationship will be far more instrumental in determining work outcomes for those who work extensively in this virtual mode, than for those who do not. Specifically, depending upon the quality of the exchange relationship with the individual's supervisor, the highest and lowest levels of commitment, job satisfaction, and performance will be experienced by individuals who work extensively in a virtual mode. In order to ground our hypotheses, we begin with a discussion of reciprocity and exchange in LMX followed by a brief review of the virtual work literature.

1. Theory and hypotheses

1.1. Reciprocity and exchange in LMX

The social exchange roots of leader–member exchange (LMX) theory (e.g. Blau, 1964) suggests that reciprocation of both material and non-material exchanges contribute to the quality of the LMX relationship (Liden et al., 1997). Supervisors possess a variety of positional resources that can be exchanged with a subordinate, involving material and non-material goods. For instance, they can choose to provide social support and offer consideration when assigning tasks and deadlines (Graen, Novak, & Sommerkamp, 1982b; Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995). Managers may also share or withhold valuable information when interacting with subordinates, or may choose to engage in mentoring or other socio-emotional interactions (Graen, Liden, & Hoel, 1982a; Graen & Scandura, 1987). Similarly, subordinates may also offer resources that are valued by managers, such as by making an extra effort, displaying greater dedication to accomplishing their supervisors' goals, or by demonstrating greater organizational commitment (Graen & Cashman, 1975; Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995). Subordinates may also offer affective-based resources, such as loyalty or a "greater capacity to make the leader appear effective or ineffective" (Graen & Cashman, 1975: 154). While these are often displayed directly to the supervisor, they can also be enacted through interactions with other organizational members.

The recurring role episodes of high quality LMX relationships are composed of "personal obligation, gratitude, and trust" (Blau, 1964: 94), resulting in exchanges that build and reinforce a cyclical response pattern in which the supervisor and subordinate exchange valued resources which continue to enhance the mutual benefits received. Over time, emotional bonding occurs between supervisor–subordinate dyads, which continue to reinforce the reciprocation of valued exchanges (Bauer & Green, 1996). For instance, latitude and support to conduct work activities, as the individual sees fit, may be provided by the supervisor, which in turn may be reciprocated by increased loyalty, positive

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