



Career adaptability, job search self-efficacy and outcomes: A three-wave investigation among Chinese university graduates

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 20 August 2013

Available online 14 September 2013

Keywords:

Career construction theory

Career adaptability

Job search

Person–organization fit

Person–job fit

ABSTRACT

Based on career construction theory, the current research examined the role of career adaptability in Chinese university graduates' job search process ($N = 270$). Results from a three-wave survey study showed that the four dimension of career adaptability (measured at wave 1) correlated positively with university graduates' job search self-efficacy (measured at wave 2) and their employment status (measured at wave 3). Among graduates who became employed, career adaptability dimensions also predicted positively their person–environment (P–E) fit perceptions (measured at wave 3). The results further showed that with the effects of demographics (gender, age, education level and major) and family background (family economical status and parental education) controlled for, when putting the four dimensions of career adaptability together, career concern and career control served as the strongest predictors for job search self-efficacy, which further mediated the positive effects of these two dimensions on employment status. In addition, career control also had indirect effect on P–E fit through the mediation of job search self-efficacy. Additional analyses using the global indicator of career adaptability also supported this mediation model such that career adaptability significantly predicted employment status and P–E fit, with these relations mediated by job search self-efficacy. These findings carry implications for research on career construction theory, as well as career education and career counseling practices.

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1. Introduction

According to career construction theory (Savickas, 1997, 2005), career development is driven by adaptation to a series of transitions from school to work, from job to job and from occupation to occupation, with the goal being person–environment integration. People develop different levels of psychological resources to manage the critical tasks, transitions and traumas in their career development. To capture this important individual difference, Savickas (1997) proposed the concept of career adaptability, which refers to the “readiness to cope with the predictable tasks of preparing for and participating in the work role and with the unpredictable adjustments prompted by changes in work and working conditions” (p. 254). Career adaptability consists of four factors: career concern, career control, career curiosity and career confidence. The four-dimensional scale of career adaptability has been developed and its structural validity was supported by empirical studies conducted in 13 countries (Savickas & Porfeli, 2012), which paves the way for further research on how these adaptive resources shape individuals' self-regulation strategies in their career construction process (Johnston, Luciano, Maggiori, Ruch, & Rossier, 2013; Tolentino,

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Garcia, Restubog, Bordia, & Tang, 2013). The current research examined the role of career adaptability in the transition from school to work by testing its relationships with job search outcomes among Chinese university graduates.

University graduates' job search success (e.g., getting employed, obtaining a desirable job position) is critical for smooth transition from school to work and for long-term career success, as those who are able to achieve job search success are likely to see cumulative advantages throughout their careers (DiPrete & Eirich, 2006). Research shows that individual differences in personality (e.g., big-five personality, approach-avoidance traits, proactive personality) serve as important antecedents of job search success (e.g., Brown, Cober, Kane, Levy, & Shalhoop, 2006; Turban, Stevens, & Lee, 2009; Wanberg, Zhu, Kanfer, & Zhang, 2012; Zimmerman, Boswell, Shipp, Dunford, & Boudreau, 2012). Unlike personality, career adaptability is more changeable, and more proximal to individuals' self-regulation process in career transitions (Savickas & Porfeli, 2012). Research into the role of career adaptability in job search process will thus provide a new theoretical perspective to understand the antecedents of job search success. Based on career construction theory, we propose that career adaptability relates positively to both objective (employment status) and subjective (person–organization fit, demand–ability fit, need–supply fit) indicators of job search success. In addition, to identify the mechanisms underlying the positive effects of career adaptability, we further examined the mediation role of job search self-efficacy (Wanberg, Zhang, & Diehn, 2010) in this process.

1.1. Career adaptability and employment status

The most prominent outcome variable in university graduates' job search is employment status (employed or unemployed), which is often assessed at graduation, or shortly after graduation (Boswell, Zimmerman, & Swider, 2012). To obtain a job offer, job seekers usually go through a series of tasks like assessing personal characteristics (e.g., values, needs, abilities), searching job market information, submitting applications, participating in interviews, negotiating with potential employers and making decisions on which job offer to accept (Brown et al., 2006; Wanberg et al., 2010). As university graduates generally have little familiarity with these tasks, job search is often regarded as stressful and full of unexpected difficulties (Turban et al., 2009). Based on career construction theory, we argue that the multiple psychological resources underlying career adaptability promote university graduates' self-regulation capacity in job search, and therefore will increase the likelihood of employment.

The first factor of career adaptability, career concern, refers to individuals' awareness of their future possibilities and considering what might come next (Savickas, 2005). As career concern represents a future orientation, it disposes university students to engage in activities that prepare them to meet the challenges in job search. As a result, college graduates with a higher level of concern are likely to be more ready for the tasks involved in job search and thus have a better chance to get employed. Career control represents an aspect of intrapersonal processes that foster self-regulation, not an interpersonal process that influences self-regulation. Control involves self-discipline and being conscientious, deliberate, organized, and decisive in performing developmental tasks and making occupational transitions. Its opposite is confusion, not dependence (Savickas, 2013). This willful working style is beneficial in setting clear goals and taking assertive actions in the job search process; that will also increase the likelihood of securing employment.

Career curiosity refers to individuals' strength of exploring various situations and roles (Savickas, 2005). We propose that a higher level of career curiosity will lead to a more comprehensive understanding of one's characteristics and job market opportunities, therefore it will also relate positively to university graduates' employment status. Career confidence represents individuals' positive perceptions on their problem-solving skills across different situations (Savickas, 2005). As individuals with stronger efficacy beliefs tend to exert more efforts and show greater persistence when encountering situations that prove difficult or demanding (Bandura, 1977), we propose that a higher level of career confidence will motivate individuals to persist when facing problems in job search and therefore will increase the likelihood of getting employed at graduation.

In sum, all the four factors of career adaptability are likely to relate positively to university graduates' employment status. In addition, career construction theory posits that these four factors combine to form a global indicator of career adaptability (Savickas & Porfeli, 2012). We thus hypothesize that global career adaptability will also relate positively to university graduates' employment status.

Hypothesis 1. University graduates' degree of career concern (H1a), career control (H1b), career curiosity (H1c), career confidence (H1d), as well as global career adaptability (H1e) will relate positively to obtaining employment at graduation.

1.2. Career adaptability and person–environment fit

Although employment status is an important outcome variable in the job search literature, researchers argue that the fit between individuals and their working environments should also be considered when evaluating their job search success. Person–environment (P–E) fit has been established as a strong predictor for both work-related and career-related outcomes (Boswell et al., 2012; Saks, 2006; Saks & Ashforth, 1997, 1999, 2002). The broad umbrella of P–E fit encompasses various lower-level fit constructs, such as person–organization (P–O) fit and person–job (P–J) fit (Chatman, 1991). P–O fit refers to the similarity between employees and their organizations on important characteristics such as values and personality (Kristof, 1996). Research has consistently shown that P–O fit predicts higher job satisfaction, higher organizational commitment, and lower intention to quit across different organizational settings (Deng, Guan, Bond, Zhang, & Hu, 2011; Guan, Deng, Risavy, Bond, & Li, 2011; Kristof-Brown, Zimmerman, & Johnson, 2005). P–J fit is operationally defined as “needs–supply fit” (N–S fit; whether an employee's needs are fulfilled in their work) and “demand–ability fit” (D–A fit; whether an employee's characteristics meet the

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