



Unraveling the relationship between organizational career management and the need for external career counseling

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Abstract

This article unravels the relationship between organizational career management and the need for external career counseling. We conducted a path analysis using data of 803 Flemish employees. The results indicate a three-way relationship between organizational career management and external career counseling. First, experiencing organizational career management reduces the need for external career counseling by enhancing career satisfaction. Second, it also reinforces the need for career counseling by encouraging employees to invest in their external employability. Finally, organizational career management and external career counseling are complementary as well. The implications of the results and the directions to be taken in future research are discussed.

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1. Introduction

Governments are increasingly becoming convinced of the added value of external career counseling for employees (Cedefop, 2005; OECD, 2004; Watts, 2005). Career counseling refers to services designed to assist people of any age, at any point in their lives, to make

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educational, training and occupational choices and to manage their careers (OECD, 2004). The notion “external” indicates that the career counseling is conducted independently from the counselee’s employer and is therefore likely to be impartial. At present, most external career counseling services are only available to a number of specific groups, mostly school leavers and the unemployed (OECD, 2004). However, since careers tend to involve a lifelong construction process, anyone might need career support at any time (Cedefop, 2005; Herr, 2003; OECD, 2004; Santos & Ferreira, 1998; Sultana, 2004; Watts, 2000). For employees, it could be argued that employers may be in a better position than external career counseling services to offer career support on a substantial and sustained basis (Watts, 2000). However, research shows that organizational career management, i.e. organizational practices concerned with the career development of employees (Orpen, 1994), is often confined to large organizations and focuses chiefly on high-potential and core employees (Dreher & Dougherty, 1997; Forrier, 2003; Maurer, Weiss, & Barbeite, 2003; OECD, 2004; Watts & Kidd, 2000). Moreover, career support provided by organizations may not be truly impartial, since the organizations in question are likely to have an interest in the outcome (OECD, 2004; Watts, 2000). These findings support the argument that employees may benefit from access to external career counseling.

The arguments in favor of external career counseling for employees reveal two assumptions about the relationship between organizational career support and external career counseling:

- The first assumption is that external career counseling functions as a *substitute* for organizational career management. This is reflected in the belief that external career counseling may act as a safety net for employees who feel they receive little or no career support from their employer. In other words, a lack of organizational career management is believed to induce a need for external career counseling. Employees who experience little career support from their employer have been shown to be less satisfied with their career (Orpen, 1994) and low career satisfaction is likely to induce people to participate in career counseling (White & Killeen, 2002).
- The second assumption considers external career counseling to be a *complement* of organizational career management. Indeed, it is believed that employees who are looking for impartiality may want to participate in external career counseling *independently* of the support they receive from their employer. Employees might look for impartial career support, for instance, when exploring external career opportunities, if they are seeking an unbiased assessment of their strengths and weaknesses or when dealing with sensitive career-endangering issues such as illness.

Although these assumptions are widely accepted and substantiate the conviction that employees should have access to external career counseling (OECD, 2004; Watts, 2000, 2005), little or no empirical research has been carried out to test them.

Moreover, discussions on this subject have often neglected a third possible relationship between organizational career support and external career counseling. In fact, organizational career support may also *reinforce* the need for external career counseling owing to its impact on individual career management, i.e. the personal effort made by individuals to advance their own career goals (Orpen, 1994). Organizational career management is believed to encourage individuals to self-manage their careers (Hiltrop, 1995; Sturges, Guest, Conway, & Mackenzie-Davey, 2002). Moreover, people who are actively engaged

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