



Mentoring support and power: A three year predictive field study on protégé networking and career success

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 8 December 2008

Available online 25 December 2008

Keywords:

Mentoring
Networking
Power

ABSTRACT

Career success of early employees was analyzed from a power perspective and a developmental network perspective. In a predictive field study with 112 employees mentoring support and mentors' power were assessed in the first wave, employees' networking was assessed after two years, and career success (i.e. income and hierarchical position) and career satisfaction were assessed after three years. Networking was the most robust predictor of career success. Mentoring received predicted career satisfaction and its effects on objective career success were mediated by networking. Further, mentoring by a powerful mentor predicted objective career success beyond networking. Based on previous findings we argue that these findings underscore the critical relationship between early career employees' networking behaviors and mentoring received.

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1. Introduction

Traditional mentoring refers to a one-on-one relationship between a less experienced (protégé) and a more experienced person (mentor), which is intended to advance the personal and professional growth of the less experienced individual (Wanberg, Welsh, & Hezlett, 2003). As meta-analyses have shown (Kammeyer-Mueller & Judge, 2008; Ng, Eby, Sorensen, & Feldman, 2005), traditional mentoring is a good predictor of an individual's career satisfaction yet only a very modest predictor of an individual's career ascendancy.

However, research on traditional mentoring has not fully explored the impact of career supporters' power on early employees' career success. Therefore, it is one purpose of the present research to investigate in a predictive study the impact of mentors' power on early employees' career success. As there is a growing recognition of employees' proactivity in the career process (Fugate, Kinicki, & Ashforth, 2004) the second purpose of the study is to compare the effects of mentors' power with employees' proactivity in the career process. Finally, the current research investigates the relationship between traditional mentoring and employees' proactivity.

1.1. A power perspective on career development

From a power perspective on career development (Kanter, 1977) the career supporter's power in and around the organization and the amount of his or her mentoring support are the most important features of employees' career success because power is the ability to make things happen (Russel, 1938).

Ragins (1997) suggested that mentors' power in the organization influences their ability to provide their protégés with exposure and thus increase the protégés' visibility within and outside organizational boundaries. Additionally, powerful

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mentors provide “reflected power” (Kanter, 1977) to their protégés, i.e. the powerful mentor’s organizational influence augments the protégé’s influence. Powerful mentors are expected to be able to protect the protégés more effectively from adverse forces (Perrewé, Young, & Blass, 2002). In addition, powerful mentors can help protégés to obtain promotions to high-ranking positions or lateral moves to high-income positions (Ragins, 1997). Finally, it can be assumed that the greater the mentors’ power in organizations the higher their practical knowledge about making a career and getting ahead. Thus, the higher the mentor’s power, the more the protégés should rely on the mentor’s advice because the protégé perceives them as valid and helpful information.

Some research has examined power indirectly through race and gender. For example, Dreher and Cox (1996) argued that White male mentors were more powerful than mentors displaying other demographic profiles and found a significant relationship between the presence of White male mentors and protégés’ compensation. Ragins and Cotton (1999) argued that male supervisory mentors were more powerful than female peer mentors. They found that supervisory mentors were perceived by protégés as providing more exposure, protection, sponsorship, and challenging assignments. Although there were no direct effects of supervisory mentoring on promotions and compensations, having a history of primarily male mentors was significantly related to compensation. Seibert, Kraimer, and Liden (2001) found, that close ties and contacts to higher levels provided employees with career sponsorship which mediated the relationship with salary, promotions, and career satisfaction.

Although these studies provide some empirical support for the proposition that mentors’ power associates positively with protégés’ career success, all these studies have limitations: Dreher and Cox (1996), for example, did not measure mentors’ power directly but gender and race. Another limitation of these studies is the self-reported nature of the variables of interest. Finally, all studies were cross-sectional thus permitting no clear temporal and causal ordering of causes and effects. In the present study we measured mentors’ power through a more objective measure of hierarchical position, the amount of mentoring was assessed both by protégés and mentors, and we conducted a predictive study over three years.

Based on previous findings that mentoring in itself is a very modest predictor of career success (Kammeyer-Mueller & Judge, 2008; Ng et al., 2005) and the finding that close ties with powerful others at work is associated with career ascendancy (Seibert et al., 2001), we postulate a moderating role of career supporters’ power on the relationship between the amount of mentoring given to protégés and their career success.

Hypothesis 1. The effect of mentoring support on career success is moderated by career supporters’ power. Specifically, mentors’ power will strengthen the positive relationship between mentoring support and career success.

1.2. A networking perspective on career development

Developmental networks are defined as concurrent relationships that foster personal growth and career development (Higgins & Kram, 2001; Molloy, 2005). Career development occurs with multiple developers who take an active interest in and action to advance the early career employees’ careers by providing developmental assistance.

In the developmental network perspective on mentoring the traditional mentor is just one career supporter in a larger social network that at the same time also may comprise other career supports inside and outside the organization at which the protégé is employed. Such a developmental network can be viewed as one component of social capital (Lin, 2001), which represents the quality and quantity of social relationships of a person (Ng et al., 2005). Empirical findings show that the number of relationships and the overall amount of assistance received indeed account for individuals’ satisfaction at work (Higgins, 2000) and long-run protégés career success outcomes such as salary, organizational retention, and promotion (Higgins & Thomas, 2001; Ng et al., 2005).

Networking is directed at establishing, cultivating, and utilizing many positive personal relationships with different higher managers at the work place (Ferris et al., 2007). Thus, networking is an important factor of career proactivity (Thompson, 2005) which creates social capital. Blickle, Witzki, and Schneider (in press) showed that networking behaviors predicted protégés’ income, hierarchical position, and mentoring received after two years. However, networking behaviors did not predict career satisfaction.

This failure to also predict career satisfaction might be due to the networking scale used by Blickle et al. (in press) which only measured upward networking (Aryee, Lo, & Kang, 1999; Turban & Dougherty, 1994). Because other empirical findings show that the number of relationships and the overall amount of assistance received indeed account for individuals’ satisfaction at work (Higgins, 2000). Thus, with a broader and more comprehensive measure of networking behaviors which does not only refer to higher-ups but also to *colleagues and associates at work* we expect that networking behaviors will also predict career satisfaction.

Hypothesis 2. The amount networking is positively related to early employees’ career success and career satisfaction.

1.3. Linking traditional mentoring and networking

Ferris and his colleagues (Ferris et al., 2005) defined political skill as: “the ability to effectively understand others at work, and use such knowledge to influence others to act in ways that enhance one’s personal and/or organizational objectives” (p. 127). One important facet of political skill at work is networking ability. Persons who are high on networking ability are able

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