



How to unleash the innovative work behavior of project staff? The role of affective and performance-based factors

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Received 16 September 2016; received in revised form 26 March 2017; accepted 3 July 2017

Available online xxxx

Abstract

Although the literature generally presumes that temporary forms of organizing such as projects are especially suitable for generating innovation, empirical support for this assumption that goes beyond case-based evidence is still scarce. The study at hand aims to close this gap in research by investigating how the characteristics of temporary organizations (TOs) affect an individual's innovative work behavior (IWB). By applying a structural equation modeling approach on an Austrian-German sample of 583 TO professionals, it can be shown that both, performance-based factors and affective factors are having a significant impact on the emergence of IWB. However, the hypothesized moderating role of a TO-related reward system has not been validated. Our results can help project managers to more effectively unleash the creative potential of their project staff and to increase the innovativeness of project work.

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Keywords: Task proficiency; Innovative work behavior; Organizational commitment; Project; Reward management; Temporary organization

1. Introduction

Innovation is an important means for achieving competitive advantage. Accordingly, the number of scholarly works dealing with innovation has increased tremendously over the last decades (Mumford, 2000; West, 2002; Ramamoorthy et al., 2005; Cefis and Marsili, 2006; Marvel and Lumpkin, 2007). The investigation of the emergence of innovation is thereby of particular interest. Existing research has shown that innovation cannot be explained by higher-level factors alone (e.g., the strategy, organizational culture), but that a closer look on lower-levels factors such as an employee's affective behavior (e.g., personal motivation, commitment) and performance (e.g., a person's cognitive skills, task proficiency) are important too (Scott and Bruce, 1994; Bunce and West, 1995; Mumford

et al., 2002; Anderson et al., 2004; Yuan and Woodman, 2010; Dörner, 2012). However, not only those employee-related factors are considered to be important aspects in generating innovation, but also the surrounding work environment. For example, there is a common held assumption among organizational scholars that temporary forms of organizing such as projects are especially suitable for generating innovation (Whittington et al., 1999; Bakker, 2010). This is generally attributed to the specific characteristics of temporary organizations (TOs) like the limited duration, uniqueness, ambiguous hierarchies, heterogeneous team constellations and informal coordination mechanisms (cf. Packendorff, 1995; Hobday, 2000; Bakker, 2010; Hanisch and Wald, 2014; Tyssen et al., 2014). Surprisingly, empirical support for this assumption that goes beyond case-based evidence is still scarce. As there is an increased tendency towards organizing work in TOs (Aubry and Lenfle, 2012; Packendorff and Lindgren, 2014; Wald et al., 2015), this issue becomes even more severe.

The study at hand aims to close this gap in innovation and TO research by empirically investigating how firms can unleash their

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employees' innovative work behavior (IWB) in the context of the TO. More precisely, we will explore whether the effect of performance-based development factors will be stronger in this respect than that of affective ones, or vice versa. Thereby, we will focus on two individual factors, TO proficiency (TOP) and TO commitment (TOC), as their permanent organization (PO)-related counterparts were found to have a strong influence on fostering IWB. Do to the fact that human resource (HR) practices like reward management (RM) showed to enable employees' IWB in permanent organizational settings (Dorenbosch et al., 2005; Abstein et al., 2014), we will explore whether this also applies to TOs.

We contribute to existing research in four ways. First, we demonstrate how the characteristics of the TO will affect the emergence of IWB at the individual-level. Thereby, we consider two separate groups of antecedents – affective and performance-based. In addition, and in line with prior research in permanent organizational settings, particular attention is given to reward management as a relevant organizational enabler for the effectiveness of such factors in fostering IWB. Second, as lower-level analysis can provide further explanations for a phenomenon's higher-level effects (cf. Coleman, 1990; Abell et al., 2008), we simultaneously support ongoing research on IWB at the organizational-level. Third, by considering the practical implications of our research, we are also able to give guidance to project managers on how to adequately stimulate the aspired behavioral outcome of their project staff, a task which is often found to be difficult in practice (especially with regard to IWB; cf. Abstein et al., 2014). Lastly, by using a broad, cross-sectional data set, we provide sufficient empirical support to our investigation.

Our work proceeds as follows. In the next section, the theoretical background of our study and the underlying research model are presented. Thereafter, we will describe the research design and methods. This will be followed by the presentation and discussion of the results. Finally, we will derive implications for theory and practice, show important limitations of our study and highlight potential fields for future research.

2. Theoretical background and research model

The term innovative work behavior describes an individual's ability within a role, a group or an entire organization to generate, to promote and to realize new ideas, products or the like (West and Farr, 1990; Janssen, 2000; de Jong and den Hartog, 2010). Since such a behavior typically exceeds the normal job and role expectations (Seibert et al., 2001), it is often related to the so-called group of extra-role behaviors (Katz, 1964; Katz and Kahn, 1966 & 78). By taking a closer look into the literature, one can find several other concepts that are closely related to IWB (cf. Abstein et al., 2014) such as employee innovativeness (West, 2002; Huhtala and Parzefall, 2007), innovative job performance (Janssen, 2001; Hammond et al., 2011) and on-the-job innovation (Dorenbosch et al., 2005), just to name a few.

According to Axtell et al. (2000), an individual's IWB can range from the development of small incremental product

improvements to the introduction of radically new product ideas. Thereby, the timing aspect plays an important role as other firms might start to imitate those ideas while time passes by. As imitation costs are in general much lower than innovation costs, the sooner a firm places its innovation(s) on the market, the more it may profit from it (cf. Lieberman and Montgomery, 1988). Moreover, innovation is a quite complex and unique process, which requires a broad range of different expertise for a successful implementation (Abra, 1994). Prior research has also shown that high levels of formalization negatively affect the generation of new ideas (Troy et al., 2001), and more precisely that the strict compliance with organizational rules and guidelines will most likely lead to routine, non-innovative (product or service) solutions (Moreno et al., 2013).

Because of today's increased environmental dynamism and uncertainty, a notable progress in research on IWB can be observed, especially with regard to its emergence (cf. Mumford et al., 2002; Anderson et al., 2004; Dörner, 2012). Surprisingly, although being commonly agreed-upon by many scholars that temporary forms of organizing are beneficial for generating innovation (Whittington et al., 1999; Bakker, 2010), empirical research on the antecedents of IWB in the context of the TO is still scarce. As a consequence, scholars such as Anderson et al. (2004) are calling for more research on innovation processes in the TO context. In a similar way, Eriksson (2014) claims that a better understanding of how TOs are impacting the emergence of dynamic capabilities (DCs), which comprises the capability to innovate (cf. Wang and Ahmed, 2007), would be of particular interest.

Following these calls in the literature, we will proceed by taking a closer look on how an individual's organizational commitment and task proficiency will influence the emergence of IWB in the TO. For example, a project worker can be willing to perform a certain task, but misses the adequate proficiency in terms of skills and qualification in order to do so (commitment but no proficiency). On the other hand, a project worker could have the skills and qualification in order to perform a certain task, but lacks the necessary motivation in order to do so (proficiency but no commitment). We chose these two factors for two reasons. First, the PO-related counterparts were found to be among the most prevalent development factors in fostering IWB. Second, the characteristics of TOs (limited duration, uniqueness, ambiguous hierarchies, informal coordination mechanisms) are considered to have a significant influence on those factors, which makes it interesting to investigate whether its known effects in POs also apply to TOs. For example, project members are compared to their PO counterparts more likely to be exposed to high levels of uncertainty, which again is found to negatively affect a person's job commitment (cf. Keegan and den Hartog, 2004; Hui and Lee, 2000).

In addition, we will explore whether the enabling role of reward management as an important HR practice on IWB also holds for TOs. Thereby, our research will not be limited to a single type of TO such as R&D projects. Instead, we consider a heterogeneous set of various types of TOs which allows for a broader generalization of the results (for further details, see Table 1).

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