

JOB-CONTENT PERCEPTIONS, PERFORMANCE-REWARD EXPECTANCIES, AND ABSENTEEISM AMONG LOW-WAGE PUBLIC-SECTOR CLERICAL EMPLOYEES

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ABSTRACT: This study explored relations of job-content perceptions (i.e., skill variety and task significance), and performance-reward expectancies, with absenteeism among 134 low-wage public-sector clerical employees. Results indicated that those employees who perceived limited performance-reward expectancies (i.e., lower instrumentality), and who considered their jobs to be either higher on skill variety or task significance, were likely to be absent more often. Moreover, the link between skill variety and absenteeism was moderated by instrumentality in a manner suggesting that respondents may have utilized absenteeism as a means of compensating for perceived workplace contributions not extrinsically rewarded. These findings further suggest that employees in occupational settings for which performance-related extrinsic rewards are less available may not respond to favorable job-content perceptions in the positive manner generally predicted by job characteristics theory.

KEY WORDS: absenteeism; job characteristics; performance-reward expectancy; clerical.

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Job characteristics theory (Hackman & Oldham, 1976, 1980) holds that when employees perceive their jobs to be challenging, as well as intrinsically rewarding, they are more likely to experience higher levels of job satisfaction and workplace motivation. It further holds that, as a consequence, improved employee productivity and decreased absenteeism and turnover should also be more likely (Rentsch & Steel, 1998). In support of this reasoning, the studies that have examined the impact of job-content perceptions on employee attendance have found that intrinsic job characteristics, such as skill variety and task significance, are generally associated with lower absenteeism (e.g., Fried & Ferris, 1987; Rentsch & Steel, 1998; Taber & Taylor, 1990).

Although the extant research relating job-content perceptions to absence has generally produced findings consistent with the logic underlying job characteristics theory, a limitation on the generalizability of these findings has been their widespread use of employee samples drawn from occupational settings with favorable extrinsic-reward systems (e.g., Hackman & Oldham, 1976). In counterpoint, a study by Locke, Sirota, and Wolfson (1976) suggests that employees in occupational settings for which instrumental extrinsic rewards are less available may not respond to favorable job-content perceptions in the positive manner generally predicted by job characteristics theory. In an experimental study of low-level civil-service commission clerks, Locke et al. found that when instrumental extrinsic rewards are lacking, job enrichment is not necessarily followed by parallel improvements in employee attitudes and behavior. Locke et al. expressed the belief that the clerks expected an increase in extrinsic rewards commensurate with their enriched contributions (i.e., heightened job responsibilities and greater skills). As a result, Locke et al. concluded that, whereas the clerks did want meaningful and challenging work, they viewed their jobs instrumentally (i.e., as means to an end), and not as ends in themselves.

The results of the Locke et al. (1976) study also highlight the unique managerial challenges faced by public-sector organizations. Often bound by rigid civil-service rules and regulations, public-sector organizations face mounting pressures from the general public for reduced costs and improved services (Rush, Schoel, & Barnard, 1995). These pressures have typically resulted in bureaucratic as well as judicial and financial limitations on the flexibility and autonomy of public-sector organizations in the form of budget-balancing requirements, judicial mandates, and restrictions on revenue generation. Perhaps the most obvious manifestation of such limits has been the resulting constraints on the ability of public-sector organizations to extrinsically reward their employees in a manner commensurate with their private-sector counterparts. The effects that these constraints have had on public-sector employees' performance-reward expectancies, particularly as they relate to workplace attitudes and behaviors, have received scant attention.

Given that job-content considerations may not be especially relevant to the attitudes and behaviors of low-wage clerical-level employees in public-sector organizations (cf. Locke et al., 1976), we believe that the generally posited inverse relationships of perceived skill variety and task significance with absenteeism may not be realized in occupational settings where there are limited performance-reward expectancies (i.e., low instrumentality). Indeed, we suggest that perceived levels of skill variety and task significance may be *positively* related to absenteeism in such settings. Further, we contend that the possibility of a positive relationship between certain job-content perceptions and absenteeism for employees in such settings is consonant with more recent evidence showing that true relationships between a set of predictor and criterion constructs can be negative in some situations, yet positive in others (e.g., Schwab, 1991; Tett, Jackson, Rothstein, & Reddon, 1999). The possibility of such bi-directional relationships may well explain why although a majority of studies report higher levels of attendance associated with favorable job-content perceptions (e.g., Hackman & Oldham, 1976; Rentsch & Steel, 1998), a minority do not (e.g., Hackman, Pearce, & Wolfe, 1978; Johns, 1978).

Building upon the reasoning introduced by Locke et al. (1976) concerning the perceived instrumentality of work, the purpose of the present study was to explore relationships of skill variety and task significance (i.e., job-content perceptions), as well as instrumentality (i.e., performance-reward expectancies), with absenteeism in a sample of low-wage public-sector clerical employees. As an intrinsic job characteristic, *skill variety* is the extent to which a job requires employees to perform a wide variety of duties involving different skills. Likewise, *task significance*, also an intrinsic job characteristic, is the extent to which a job is significant to an organization. Following the work of Locke et al. (1976), it is reasoned that employees in occupational settings characterized by limited performance-reward expectancies (i.e., low instrumentality) may be more likely to interpret these intrinsic job characteristics as factors for which they should be extrinsically rewarded. *Instrumentality* is generally viewed as the extent to which job performance leads to desirable outcomes such as promotions, pay increases, and greater job security. Previous research has demonstrated that instrumentality can have important implications for organizational behavior, especially for civil-service public-sector employees (Kemery, Bedeian, & Zacur, 1996).

Johns and Nicholson (1982) have noted that, in some settings, allowable absence days constitute an employer provided extrinsic benefit that, from the perspective of social exchange theory (Blau, 1964), may be used by employees as a means of compensating for limited performance-reward expectancies. The use of absences in this manner has been shown to occur most likely in organizations that allow for discretionary absenteeism by employees (Nicholson & Johns, 1985). As Locke et al. (1976) posited, clerical workers who perceive their jobs as entailing a wide vari-

ety of activities (i.e., high skill variety) that are relatively significant (i.e., high task significance) may have a coinciding expectation for concomitant extrinsic rewards. Accordingly, in occupational settings characterized by low levels of extrinsic rewards, it is plausible that employees who believe that their jobs require performing a wide variety of important and challenging activities, and who report lower levels of expectancies between their job performance and desirable extrinsic outcomes (i.e., low instrumentality), may be absent from work more often as a means of realizing a more equitable exchange with their employing organization.

In addition to investigating correlations between job-content perceptions and absenteeism, the possibility of interactions between perceived instrumentality and job content variables (i.e., skill variety and task significance) in predicting absenteeism was also investigated. Consistent with the rationale explained in the preceding paragraphs, the relationships of task variety and job significance perceptions with absence could conceivably depend on the extent to which employees believe they will be extrinsically rewarded for their job performance. Among employees who believe they are more likely to be extrinsically rewarded for their job performance, perceived skill variety and task significance may not be positively related to absenteeism because these employees may not deem it prudent to use available absence days in a compensatory manner. Accordingly, instrumentality may interact with skill variety, task significance, or both, in predicting absenteeism. In particular, higher perceived levels of skill variety, task significance, or both, would more likely be positively correlated with absenteeism at low levels of perceived instrumentality than at high levels of perceived instrumentality.

METHOD

Study Setting and Data Collection Procedures

Data for this study were collected from civil-service clerical employees across 30 departments of a large metropolitan city. As in the Locke et al. (1976) study, the employees sampled held jobs performing general office duties. Prolonged municipal budget constraints had detrimentally affected pay levels and the availability of pay raises for some seven years; pay increases over the seven-year period preceding data collection had averaged less than 1% per annum. Promotion opportunities were also scarce as the municipality was in the midst of downsizing its workforce. As such, these circumstances would be expected to necessarily result in weak overall reward expectancies among the municipality's employees. A compensation report compiled by an independent consulting firm indicated that the municipality's employees were paid approximately 30% less than their counterparts in similar cities, and that 20% of its employees had earnings

below the federal poverty line for a family of four. Entry-level clerical employees were paid wages that were very close to the federally mandated minimum wage. Similarly, the average hourly wage for mid-level clerical employees was less than 10% above minimum wage.

In addition to holidays and annual leave (i.e., vacation days), clerical employees in the municipality were allowed up to approximately 15 days (on average) of personal or discretionary absences per year. To take personal leave, employees were required only to phone in (or have a family member or friend do so) that they would be absent. Employees were to later indicate the use of personal leave on their time sheets. Holidays and annual leave absences did not count as personal leave. Upon ending their employment with the municipality, employees would receive full payment for unused annual leave, but only 20% payment for unused personal leave. Except for rare instances in which there were concerns over abuse of personal leave, the municipality did not require employees to document the purpose for which personal leave was taken. Thus, within general limits, employees could utilize personal leave as a discretionary means of satisfying their needs. Evidence from existing studies suggests that under such circumstances, the vast majority of personal absences are typically discretionary in nature (Dalton & Perry, 1981; Farrell & Stamm, 1988; Harrison & Hulin, 1989; Winkler, 1980).

The surveys used in this research were part of a comprehensive clerical job study and were sent to employees via inter-office mail. Of relevance to this study, the municipality's management precluded the inclusion of "sensitive" measures such as direct assessments of the extent to which employees viewed absenteeism as a reward or the extent to which they used absenteeism to compensate for insufficient rewards. Employees' identities were requested on tear-off sheets attached to the surveys. Information on the tear-off sheets was later used to match surveys to absence data provided by the municipality. Participants completed and returned the surveys at their convenience via inter-office mail by placing them in sealed envelopes addressed to the person overseeing the clerical job study.

Usable questionnaires were returned by 172 out of approximately 400 potential participants, for a response rate of 44%. Absence data, however, were unavailable for 38 respondents, resulting in a final sample of 134 individuals. The ethnic and gender composition of the final sample was representative of that for the municipality's clerical-level workforce; 72% African-American females, 19% Caucasian females, 2% Hispanic or Native American females, 4% Caucasian males, and 3% African-American males.

Measures

Instrumentality. Instrumentality was assessed with 8 items adapted from the Work-Related Expectancies Scale (Sims, Szilagyi, & McKemey,

1976). The items tapped expectancies between job performance and desirable outcomes such as pay increases, job promotions, and job security. A 6-point response scale ranging from 0 (*do not agree at all*) to 5 (*agree strongly*) accompanied the items composing this measure. A sample item is: "It is more likely that I will be given a pay raise or promotion at this organization if I do high quality work." Alpha for this measure was .82.

Skill Variety. Two items from the short form of the Job Characteristics Inventory (JCI; Sims, Szilagyi, & Keller, 1976) were used to assess perceived skill variety. A 5-point response scale ranging from 0 (*very little*) to 4 (*a great deal*) accompanied the following items: "How much variety is there in your job?" and "To what extent does your job provide the opportunity to do a number of different duties each day?" Alpha for this measure was .80.

Task Significance. The degree to which respondents perceived their work to be significant was measured with 4 items from the JCI. A sample item is: "To what extent do you feel like you are contributing something significant to your organization?" Employees responded on a 5-point scale ranging from 0 (*very little*) to 4 (*a great deal*). Alpha for this measure was .75.

Absenteeism. The municipality used a calendar year as its absence accounting period. Congruent with Harrison and Martocchio's (1998) proposition that one-calendar-year measures of absenteeism have ecological validity, the total number of absences cumulated for this time period was obtained from personnel records for 134 of the 172 employees who had completed surveys. The reported study's final sample, therefore, consists of 134 respondents. Absences were reported by the municipality for the year in which the survey data were collected. The municipality did not distinguish between voluntary and involuntary absenteeism. As such, the measure of absenteeism used in this study was the only one available. However, given the municipality's absence policy, as described in the second paragraph of the Method section, prior research suggests it is likely that the majority of variance in absenteeism among the respondents was associated with discretionary causes (Dalton & Perry, 1981; Farrell & Stamm, 1988; Harrison & Hulin, 1989; Winkler, 1980).

RESULTS

The means, standard deviations, alphas, and correlations for all study variables are presented in Table 1. The low mean for instrumentality ($M = 1.23$) suggests that the respondents' perceptions were congruent with objective data about the availability of extrinsic rewards and support the premise that their work setting was marked by limited per-

Table 1
Means, Standard Deviations, Alphas, and Correlations

Variables	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4
1. Instrumentality	1.23	1.11	(.82)			
2. Skill variety	3.63	1.04	.02	(.80)		
3. Task significance	2.92	.79	.05	.50**	(.75)	
4. Absenteeism	8.40	7.73	-.17*	.24**	.21*	—

Note. $n = 134$. * $p \leq .05$, two-tailed. ** $p \leq .01$, two-tailed.

Alpha coefficients are in parentheses on the diagonal, except for the single-item absenteeism measure. Skill variety and task significance were scored from 0 to 4; instrumentality was scored from 0 to 5.

formance-reward expectancies. As anticipated, instrumentality was negatively correlated with absenteeism ($r = -.17$, $p = .05$, two-tailed), whereas skill variety ($r = .24$, $p < .01$, two-tailed) and task significance ($r = .21$, $p < .05$, two-tailed) were positively correlated with absenteeism.

Recent studies have concluded that ordinary least squares regression analysis of untransformed absence data is a valid means of estimating relationships involving absenteeism (e.g., Rentsch & Steel, 1998; Sturman, 1999). A set of hierarchical multiple regression analyses (Cohen & Cohen, 1983) was, therefore, used to test the relations of instrumentality, skill variety, and task significance with absenteeism. In addition to investigating main effects, tests for interactive effects between instrumentality and job-content perceptions in the prediction of absenteeism were conducted.

The results of the hierarchical regression analyses are presented in Table 2. As a predictor set entered at the first hierarchical step, instrumentality ($\beta = -.16$, $p = .06$) and skill variety ($\beta = .24$, $p < .01$) explained 8% of the variance in absenteeism. The entry of the Instrumentality \times Skill Variety interaction term at the second hierarchical step explained incremental variance ($\Delta R^2 = .03$, $p < .05$) in absenteeism. Therefore, instrumentality moderated the relationship between skill variety and absenteeism. Furthermore, the complete equation that included the main-effect terms and two-way interaction term for instrumentality and skill variety explained 11% of the variance in absenteeism. The same two-step hierarchical regression procedure was conducted with task significance replacing skill variety. When entered at the first hierarchical step, instrumentality ($\beta = -.17$, $p = .05$) and task significance ($\beta = .21$, $p = .01$) together accounted for 7% of the variance in absenteeism. The inclusion of the Instrumentality \times Task Significance interaction term at the second hierarchical step failed to explain unique variance in absenteeism. Consequently, instrumentality did not moderate the relationship between task significance and absenteeism.

Table 2
Results of Hierarchical Regression Analyses Predicting Absenteeism

	Step 1		Step 2	
	ΔR^2	β	ΔR^2	β
Step 1: Main-effect terms	.08**			
Instrumentality		-.16†		.43
Skill variety		.24**		.40**
Step 2: Interaction term			.03*	
Instrumentality \times Skill Variety				-.64*
Step 1: Main-effect terms	.07**			
Instrumentality		-.17*		.32
Task significance		.21**		.31**
Step 2: Interaction term			.01	
Instrumentality \times Task Significance				-.51

Note. $n = 134$. ΔR^2 is the change in variance accounted for by variable(s) entered at each step. β is the standardized regression coefficient for each variable.
† $p = .06$. * $p \leq .05$. ** $p \leq .01$.

Because moderator effects can be artifacts that result from non-linear trends associated with separate predictor variables (Lubinski & Humphreys, 1990; MacCallum & Mar, 1995), curvilinear effects for instrumentality and skill variety in predicting absenteeism were tested. Even at a significance level of $p < .10$, neither instrumentality nor skill variety approached a significant curvilinear relationship with absenteeism. Consequently, curvilinear effects could be ruled out as the cause of the observed interaction between instrumentality and skill variety in predicting absenteeism.

Using the methodology of Aiken and West (1991), we estimated the relationship between skill variety and absenteeism at one standard deviation above, and one standard deviation below, the mean of instrumentality. At high instrumentality, there was no relationship between skill variety and absenteeism ($\beta = .05$, $p = .65$). At low instrumentality, however, skill variety demonstrated a positive relationship with absenteeism ($\beta = .38$, $p = .001$). In sum, the simple slope coefficients supported the anticipated form of the interaction between skill variety and instrumentality in predicting absenteeism.

DISCUSSION

The results this study showed that, among low-wage public-sector clerical employees, those who perceived especially limited performance—

reward expectancies (i.e., low instrumentality), and who considered their jobs to be either higher on skill variety or task significance, were likely to be absent more often. These results suggest that relations between favorable job-content perceptions and absenteeism can be positive in settings characterized by the limited performance-related extrinsic rewards. Moreover, the unique variance in absenteeism explained by instrumentality parallels other research demonstrating the efficacy of instrumentality in predicting the work behavior of civil-service public-sector employees (e.g., Kemery et al., 1996).

In addition to job-content perceptions' direct relationships with absenteeism, instrumentality moderated the relationship between skill variety and absenteeism. In particular, the findings showed that perceived skill variety had a positive relationship with absenteeism at low levels of instrumentality, but not at high levels of instrumentality. This suggests that the focal respondents may have utilized absenteeism as a means of compensating for perceived workplace contributions not extrinsically rewarded (Johns & Nicholson, 1982; Van Yperen, Hagedoorn, & Geurts, 1996). The efficacy of instrumentality, in terms of direct and interactive relationships, comports with other research demonstrating that the economic functions of work can appreciably impact interpretations of and responses to work situations (e.g., Doran, Stone, Brief, & George, 1991). The relationship between task significance and absenteeism, however, was not moderated by instrumentality. This finding suggests the possibility that high task significance may have been construed by the respondents as a compensable factor regardless of perceived instrumentality. Perhaps the uniformly low levels of pay and resulting decline in real income over time experienced by the respondents prompted them to necessarily interpret perceived task significance as a factor for which they should be compensated. Perceptions of greater skill variety, however, seemed to have meaning as a greater contribution only at low levels of perceived instrumentality.

These findings should alert researchers and practitioners to the possibility of bidirectional relationships. Even when accumulated evidence from several independent studies suggests that correlations between a set of predictor and criterion constructs are usually in one direction (e.g., negative), researchers must not assume that the "true" relations are (or should be) *always* in that direction. As articulated by Tett et al. (1999), relationships between a set of predictor and criterion constructs "can vary meaningfully as a function of situational factors rarely reported in source studies" (p. 21). Likewise, the use of meta-analytic procedures that are based on the premise of unidirectional relations may result in underestimating effect sizes, due to the cancellation of positive and negative estimates from different source studies (Tett et al., 1999).

It should be noted that although African-American females com-

pared 72% of the sample in this study, low-paying occupations and jobs in the United States are disproportionately occupied by this group (Anderson & Shapiro, 1996; Schmitz, Williams, & Gabriel, 1994; Tomaskovic-Devey, 1993). That is, the ethnic and gender composition of the focal sample is fairly representative of many work situations characterized by relatively low levels of pay and other extrinsic outcomes. Congruent with Schwab (1991), however, we do not claim that the findings of the present study are widely generalizable. Rather, the results demonstrate that a "usual" pattern of relations does not necessarily exist across occupational settings.

Because our study was conducted with low-wage public-sector clerical employees in a relatively homogeneous low-reward occupational setting, reported variance in skill variety, task significance, and instrumentality reflected individual differences in perceived job content and performance-reward experiences. It should be recognized that the cross-sectional design of this study does not allow for conclusions concerning presumed causal relationships between job-content perceptions and absenteeism. Further, neither the present study nor others on job-content perceptions and absence (e.g., Rentsch & Steel, 1998) have assessed the cognitive processes that theoretically mediate focal relations. As noted in the Method section, limitations were placed on the types of measures included in the present study. Future research might include variables such as equity sensitivity perceptions, beliefs about possible benefits and costs associated with absence, and absence intentions (e.g., Harrison & Martocchio, 1998; Martocchio, 1994; Martocchio & Judge, 1994; Sauley & Bedeian, 2000; Van Yperen et al., 1996).

In closing, the results of the study underscore the notion that relations between workplace perceptions and behavior may not be the same in every occupational setting. In doing so, they comport with the conclusions of Locke et al. (1976) in suggesting that low-wage public-sector clerical employees may not respond to favorable job-content perceptions in the same manner as do employees in occupational settings that offer greater opportunity for performance-related extrinsic rewards. Additional research is needed to further investigate relations between job-content perceptions and behavior in other occupational settings, as such research is important for advancing understanding and delimiting the generalizability of extant findings.

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