

Types of Workplace Social Support in the Prediction of Job Satisfaction

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Research on social support and job satisfaction has yielded mixed results, partly because studies have rarely examined different types of workplace social support, such as collegial support, task support, coaching, and career mentoring. This study identified the relative contributions of different types of social support to job satisfaction and explored the relationship between social support and job tenure. Overall, social support accounted for approximately 17% of the variance in job satisfaction and 9% of the variance in job tenure. Career mentoring and task support were the types of social support most predictive of job satisfaction. Coaching and task support were the types of social support most predictive of job tenure.

Workplace social support has been defined as the “actions of others that are either helpful or intended to be helpful” (Deelstra et al., 2003, p. 324). It includes a variety of interpersonal behaviors among workers that enhance individuals’ psychological or behavioral functioning. These may include mentoring, providing emotional support, assisting others with assigned tasks, and teaching about social power structures (Hill, Bahniuk, Dobos, & Rouner, 1989). Beginning with the earliest need-fulfillment theories of job satisfaction, workplace social support has been identified as a predictor of job satisfaction (Orpen & Pinshaw, 1975; Smither, 1988; Stamps, 1997; Vroom, 1964). Most research has found workplace social support to be positively predictive of job satisfaction and other positive outcomes (Harris, Moritzen, Robitschek, Imhoff, & Lynch, 2001; Smith & Tziner, 1998; Winstead, Derlega, Montgomery, & Pilkington, 1995). However, there are exceptions to this rule in the research literature (Ducharme & Martin, 2000). Workplace social support also predicts a variety of negative outcomes, including absenteeism and turnover (Winstead et al., 1995), burnout (Myung-Yong & Harrison, 1998), and depression and anxiety (El-Bassel, Guterman, Bargal, & Su, 1998; Olson & Shultz, 1994).

Findings may be mixed because the construct of workplace social support is multifaceted (Bahniuk, Dobos, & Hill, 1990). The *source* of support may be a supervisor, mentor, or colleague; the *content* of the support may include information, appraisal, assistance with tasks, or emotional support (Bahniuk et al., 1990; Deelstra et al., 2003). Hill et al. (1989) defined four types of workplace social support: *Task support* focuses on sharing and exchanging work assignments and ideas. *Career mentoring*

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refers to parentlike or adviser relationships with other individuals who have more experience. *Coaching* involves teaching organizational/professional rules and goals, including organizational politics. *Collegial social support* includes sharing friendships, personal problems, and confidences. Bahniuk et al. found that, among business managers, instrumental support from colleagues and mentoring both predicted higher levels of job satisfaction, along with perceived success, managerial level, and income. However, coaching and collegial support had no effect on job satisfaction.

The relationship between workplace social support and the length of time an employee chooses to remain at the same job (i.e., job tenure) has recently been explored. Positive relationships with supervisors have been reported to strongly predict job tenure (Buckingham & Coffman, 1999; Van Breukelen, Van Der Vlist, & Steensma, 2004; Vecchio & Boatwright, 2002). Positive organizational social climates and the presence of friends or family at a particular work site have also been reported to predict employee retention (Van Breukelen et al., 2004; Milman, 2003; Pizam & Ellis, 1999). Given the importance of supervisor support and access to friends or family at work, it seems reasonable to hypothesize that career mentoring (i.e., support from the supervisor) and collegial support and task support (both of which may be more readily available from friends and family) may be types of workplace social support that strongly predict job tenure.

In this study, we attempted to determine types of workplace social support that best predict job satisfaction and job tenure. On the basis of Bahniuk et al.'s (1990) previous findings, we hypothesized that career mentoring and task support would be the strongest predictors of job satisfaction and that career mentoring, collegial support, and task support would be the strongest predictors of job tenure.

Method

Participants

The study included 122 female and 57 male full-time paid employees in two training hospitals in the southwestern part of the United States. The sample was 57% Caucasian, 10% African American, 17% Asian American, 9% Hispanic, and 7% "other." Mean age was 41.8 years ($SD = 10.8$), average education level was 15.3 years ($SD = 2.6$), and mean annual income was \$28,500 ($SD = \$14,500$). To derive a range of occupations, we approached multiple hospital departments, including patient care areas and departments such as accounting, building maintenance, and laundry; 50% of the sample was in direct patient care. After announcing the opportunity to participate in the study, an investigator (first author) visited the department to distribute a survey that participants completed and that was retrieved later on the same day. A total of 237 surveys were distributed; 184 were returned, yielding a return rate of 77.6%. The institutional research board for the hospital administering the study reviewed and approved the protocol.

Instruments

Participants completed a demographic questionnaire that elicited data on their age, gender, ethnicity, education level, job tenure, job title and job description, salary, relationship status, and number of children. Partici-

pants also completed the Job in General scale (Ironson, Smith, Brannick, Gibson, & Paul, 1989), a global index of job satisfaction. Participants were asked to indicate if each adjective–phrase item described their jobs by answering “yes,” “no,” or “?” to each item. Scores ranged from 0 to 54. Scores on the instrument yielded alpha coefficients that ranged from .91 to .95 (Ironson et al., 1989), indicating adequate reliability. Correlations with scores on similar job satisfaction measures ranged from .67 to .80 (Ironson et al., 1989), indicating scale validity.

Workplace social support was measured using the Mentoring and Communication Support Scale (Hill et al., 1989), a 15-item measure that yields subscale scores for Career Mentoring, Coaching, Collegial Social Support, and Task Support. Examples of items measuring career mentoring include “Someone of higher rank has shown a parental-like interest in me and my career” and “Someone of higher rank has placed me in important assignments or positions.” Examples of items measuring coaching include “I have been coached about office politics” and “I have had an associate teach me the informal rules of my organization.” Examples of items measuring collegial social support include “My associates and I are friends as well as coworkers” and “My associates and I share confidences with each other.” Examples of items measuring task support include “My associates and I assist each other in accomplishing assigned tasks” and “I work jointly in major projects or cases with my associates.” Items are rated on a Likert-type scale of 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*); therefore, scores ranged from 15 to 75. Cronbach’s alphas for scores on the subscales ranged from .75 to .89 (Downs, Hill, Bahniuk, & Rouner, 1994), indicating adequate reliability. Scores had positive correlations with upward career mobility and satisfaction with promotions (Hill et al., 1989), indicating validity.

Analysis

Variable distributions were normal, except for the Job in General score, which was negatively skewed. Such a negative skew, or ceiling effect, is a common observation in job satisfaction scores regardless of the measure used (Spokane, Meir, & Catalano, 2000). Evidently, research participants’ ability to place themselves in satisfying jobs exceeds researchers’ present ability to measure the upper limits of job satisfaction. A reflect log transformation normalized the distribution. It was inverted to ease interpretation of findings. Means and standard deviations are presented in Table 1, as are intercorrelations. Results of *t* tests indicated no gender differences in age, number of children, education, job tenure, income, job satisfaction, or social support in the workplace. Career Mentoring, Coaching, and Task Support all had significant positive relationships with job satisfaction. Coaching and job tenure were negatively correlated, whereas Task Support and job tenure were positively correlated.

Simultaneous multiple regression analysis using the four types of social support to predict job satisfaction (see Table 2) yielded an adjusted R^2 of .176 ($F = 10.22, p < .001$), indicating that these combined types of social support were significant predictors of job satisfaction. Significant individual predictors of job satisfaction were Career Mentoring ($\beta = .38, p < .001$) and Task Support ($\beta = .17, p < .05$). Coaching and Collegial Support were not significant individual predictors of job satisfaction. Simultaneous multiple

TABLE 1
Means, Standard Deviations, and Correlations Between
Variables (N = 179)

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	M	SD
1. Job tenure	—	.01	-.07	-.21**	.09	.16*	5.23	5.64
2. Job satisfaction	.01	—	.41**	.20**	.12	.29**	39.71	12.18
3. Career Mentoring	-.07	.41**	—	.53**	.18**	.37**	12.53	4.39
4. Coaching	-.21**	.20**	.53**	—	.32**	.30**	8.92	3.06
5. Collegial Support	.09	.12	.18**	.32**	—	.53**	13.81	3.78
6. Task Support	.16*	.29**	.37**	.30**	.53**	—	15.66	3.49

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

regression analysis using the four types of social support to predict job tenure (see Table 3) yielded an adjusted R^2 of .091 ($F = 5.32, p < .001$), indicating that these combined types of social support were significant predictors of job tenure. Individual predictors of job tenure were Coaching ($\beta = -.31, p < .001$) and Task Support ($\beta = .22, p < .02$).

Discussion

The first hypothesis was supported: Career Mentoring and Task Support predicted job satisfaction, whereas Coaching and Collegial Support did not. This is consistent with Bahniuk et al.'s (1990) findings in a sample of female managers. The present study also extends Yoder's (1995) finding that workplace social support predicts job tenure. The hypothesis that Career Mentoring, Collegial Support, and Task Support would predict job tenure was only partially supported; Career Mentoring did not, whereas Coaching and Task Support predicted job tenure in this sample. Task Support positively predicted job tenure, and Coaching negatively predicted job tenure. In this analysis, the combined types of social support explained 17.6% of the variance of job satisfaction. When one considers the fact that the predictor most often used in vocational counseling (interest congruence) reliably explains about 12% of the variance in job satisfaction (Assouline & Meir, 1987; Meir, 1995), the meaningfulness and potential utility of the finding is clear. In this study, the combined types of social support explained 9% of the variance in job tenure. Previous research on job tenure has revealed that this variable is difficult to predict because of the many and diverse variables involved (e.g., job satisfaction, compensation, working conditions, family roles, and responsibilities; Harris et al., 2001). Thus, identifying workplace social support as a significant predictor of job tenure is a new step in the research literature on tenure.

TABLE 2
Multiple Regression for Types of Social Support as Predictors
of Job Satisfaction (N = 179)

Variable	B	SE B	β	p
Career Mentoring	.03	.13	.38	< .01
Coaching	-.01	.01	-.05	.57
Collegial Support	.00	.01	-.02	.79
Task Support	.01	.01	.17	.04

Note. Adjusted $F^2 = .176, p < .001$.

TABLE 3

**Multiple Regression for Types of Social Support as Predictors
of Job Tenure (N = 179)**

Variable	B	SE B	β	p
Career Mentoring	.00	.12	-.02	.84
Coaching	-.57	.16	-.31	< .01
Collegial Support	.14	.13	.09	.30
Task Support	.36	.15	.22	.01

Note. Adjusted $R^2 = .091$, $p < .001$.

On the basis of similar findings, Deelstra et al. (2003) suggested that Collegial Support may not predict job satisfaction because individuals who are dissatisfied or stressed at work may be more likely to seek collegial support. The same may be true of Coaching; individuals who are unsuccessful in managing workplace relationships may be more likely to seek or receive this form of social support. Career Mentoring was related to higher levels of job satisfaction; recent research on mentoring indicates that it is associated with higher levels of career success (Kirchmeyer, 2005). It is likely that individuals who believe that they are supported by their supervisors and that they are successful in their work may experience higher levels of job satisfaction. It is possible that Career Mentoring may not predict job tenure because employees who seek mentoring may be more interested in being upwardly mobile and may readily seek other positions for greater career success. Findings suggest that it is more specifically Task Support that is associated with greater job tenure and job satisfaction. This is consistent with recent research, which has noted that individuals who receive high levels of support with job tasks report higher levels of intrinsic motivation for even very demanding jobs (Van Yperen & Hagedoorn, 2003) and, thus, may be less dependent on reinforcement from the employer or other types of social support to both enjoy and decide to continue in that job. Higher amounts of coaching were found to correlate with shorter job tenure. It is possible that this negative result may be due to the intentions of the individuals seeking coaching; these may be people who are seeking to advance and, thus, need to be aware of the workplace structure and politics. Another possible explanation is that people with less job tenure are more likely to seek coaching, because they are not yet familiar with workplace structure and politics.

This study addresses the mixed results in the literature of this field by separating aspects of social support into coaching, mentoring, collegial support, and task support. These analyses more specifically identified sources of social support associated with job satisfaction and job tenure. Seventeen percent of the variance in job satisfaction and 9% of the variance in job tenure were accounted for in this study. Career Mentoring and Task Support were the types of social support that best explained job satisfaction, and Coaching and Task Support were the types of social support that best explained job tenure. Although this was not a sample of individuals in career counseling, these findings support the need for future studies to determine if counseling interventions to teach workers to seek out task support may be useful.

Limitations of this study include a modest sample size, a higher proportion of female than male participants, and a correlational design.

Results are also limited by sampling specifically in nonprofit settings (i.e., hospitals); therefore, it may not be appropriate to generalize these results to for-profit settings. Similarly, the average level of education in this sample was higher than the average in the United States; thus, it is not clear whether these results could be generalized to workers who have lower levels of education. Results largely replicated the findings of Bahniuk et al. (1990) but are insufficient to establish causality. In combination with the previous literature on social support and vocational adjustment, these results provide additional empirical support for organizational interventions that may enhance job satisfaction and increase job tenure across a variety of workplaces; future research on such interventions may address issues of causality and could contribute to the field of career counseling by helping workers develop more effective forms of workplace social support to enhance job satisfaction. The findings regarding job tenure may be particularly useful at the organizational level, because extending job tenure may reduce training and other turnover costs to employers.

With the aforementioned study limitations in mind, it may be useful for career counselors, coaches, and mentors to work with clients to examine the types of social support available in their workplaces, particularly if the client expresses concern about social factors relevant to job satisfaction and decisions to maintain versus leave the job. It may be possible to facilitate a client's efforts to seek more constructive types of social support in the workplace. For example, a client who has access to high levels of collegial support may feel a lack of job satisfaction because of a lack of career mentoring and may benefit from encouragement to explore supervisors as a source of support and mentoring. It also may be possible to provide organizational interventions, for example, training supervisors to provide mentoring and training teams of workers to provide task support for one another. It should be noted, however, that these are preliminary findings from a specific sample, and further research is necessary before firm clinical recommendations can be made. Useful directions for future research on the basis of our study include measuring types of social support, rather than social support as a unitary construct, when studying vocational outcomes. It may also be useful to explore the potential moderating effects of participant variables such as education level, compensation level, and occupational group in the relationships between workplace social support and vocational outcomes.

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