Challenge at work: a matter of give and take

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CHAPTER ONE
JOB CHALLENGE: AN INTRODUCTION

Five years ago, before starting my Ph.D. project, I made my money as a croupier in a casino. Although I respected the job a lot and found the job very challenging at first, I soon got bored and not really happy with my work. At that time, I realized how important it is to be challenged in a job, and I really got to understand the meaning of the well-known words: “I’m ready for a new challenge!” Like many young people (Van Vianen, De Pater, & Preenen, 2009) I was contemplating a lot about what job to choose. Luckily, not much later, I found the most challenging job in my life so far, my Ph.D. project, which is ironically enough about job challenge.

Indeed, job challenge has been found to be a key factor influencing individuals’ job-choice decisions (e.g., Boswell, Roehling, LePine, & Moynihan, 2003; Slaughter, Richard, & Martin, 2006). Research has also shown that job challenge is highly relevant for employees and their organizations. Job challenge has found to be important for managerial development (DeReu & Wellman, 2009; Dragoni, Tesluk, Russell, & Oh, 2009; Lyness & Thompson, 1997, 2000; McCauley, Ohlott, & Ruderman, 1999; McCauley, Ruderman, Ohlott, & Morrow, 1994) and career advancement (e.g., De Pater, Van Vianen, Bechtoldt, & Klehe, 2009; De Pater, Van Vianen, Fischer, & Van Ginkel, 2009), and is positively associated with job attitudes such as job satisfaction (e.g., James & Jones, 1980; Kirk-Brown & Wallace, 2004), commitment (e.g., Dixon, Cunningham, Sagas, Turner, & Kent, 2005; Huang, Lawler, & Lei, 2007), and motivation (e.g., Feldman, 2002; Houkes, Janssen, de Jonge, & Bakker, 2003).

Despite the growing amount of research on job challenge, much remains to be examined. First, because job challenge has many beneficial outcomes for employees, such as learning and development, it is often assumed, but never tested empirically, that job challenge may reduce voluntary turnover (e.g., Carmeli, 2005; Conklin & Desselle, 2007; Loquercio, 2006; Salopek, 2000). However, challenging jobs stimulate learning (e.g., Dragoni et al., 2009; McCauley et al., 1994) and thus increase employees’ human capital and opportunities for employment in other organizations (Benson, Finegold, & Mohrman, 2004; Campbell & Campbell, 2003; Ito & Brotheridge, 2005). Investigating the consequences of job challenge for turnover intentions and behaviors seems thus warranted.

Second, although the positive consequences of performing challenging tasks for employees’ development, careers, and job attitudes are well established, research has hardly explored possible moderators in these relationships (De Pater, Van Vianen, & Bechtoldt, 2010). In addition, extant research has neglected possible negative outcomes of performing challenging assignments (De Rue & Wellman, 2009; Van Vianen et al., 2008). For example, job challenge may not only result in learning and development, but may also increase an employee’s stress levels (Podsakoff, Lepine, & Lepine, 2007).
Third, little is yet known about factors that influence the amount of challenge employees have in their work. For example, there may be individual characteristics that predispose employees to seek challenging assignments (De Pater, Van Vianen, Fischer, et al., 2009) and supervisors’ task allocation decisions may also influence the extent to which employees encounter challenging experiences in their jobs (De Pater et al., 2010).

Last, but not least, the conceptualization and operationalization of job challenge in organizational literature and research is far from consistent. For example, some researchers operationalized and assessed job challenge in terms of objective work characteristics (e.g., De Pater et al., 2010; De Pater, Van Vianen, Bechtoldt et al., 2009; De Rue & Wellman, 2009; McCauley et al., 1994) whereas other researchers view job challenge as a subjective cognitive experience or state (e.g., Cuneen & Sidwell, 1994; Dixon et al., 2005; Huang et al., 2007; Walsh, Taber, & Beehr, 1980). Although measures of job challenge as objective characteristics of work have been developed (e.g., De Pater, Van Vianen, Bechtoldt et al., 2009; McCauley et al., 1994; 1999), a theoretically grounded and validated measure for experienced job challenge is lacking (Preenen, Van Vianen, De Pater, & Geerling, 2010).

The central aim of the present dissertation is to provide a better understanding of the conceptualization, determinants, processes, and outcomes of job challenge by focusing on the issues mentioned above. In this chapter, I will provide an overview of the theory and research on job challenge. Specifically, I will first discuss existing conceptualizations of job challenge. Hereafter, I will discuss potential causes of individual differences in job challenge and I will outline its consequences for individual development and learning, career success, and job attitudes. Finally, I will provide an overview of the chapters in this dissertation.

**The Concept of Job Challenge**

Job challenge has been conceptualized in different ways (e.g., Cuneen & Sidwell, 1994; De Pater, Van Vianen, Bechtoldt et al., 2009; Dixon et al., 2005; Huang et al., 2007; McCauley et al., 1994; Walsh et al., 1980). In general, researchers have referred to job challenge as a characteristic of work (e.g., De Pater, Van Vianen, Bechtoldt et al., 2009; McCauley et al., 1999; McCauley et al., 1994), a cognitive appraisal (e.g., Cuneen & Sidwell, 1994; Walsh et al., 1980), or a (physiological) mood state (e.g., Meyer & Allen, 1988; Taylor, 1981). Other researchers used the term job challenge but did not provide a definition of the construct in their studies (e.g., Bandura, 1986; Csikszentmihalyi, 1997; Maurer & Tarulli, 1994).

**Job Challenge as a Work Characteristic**

Various organizational theories have conceptualized job challenge as a work characteristic. For instance, goal-setting theory (e.g., Locke & Latham, 1990) proposes that goals should be both specific and challenging in order to increase employees’ performance on the task. From this perspective, a challenging goal is defined as being difficult but obtainable.
This conceptualization corroborates Berlew and Hall’s (1966) definition of job challenge: “having to meet performance expectations that are reasonably high” (p. 209). The Job Demands Model (Karasek, 1979) also considers job challenge to be a characteristic of the job. This model defines job challenge in terms of quantitative (i.e., the degree to which employees are required to work fast and have a lot of work to do in a short time) and qualitative (i.e., having to deal with role ambiguity and/or with conflicting roles) role demands (e.g., Janssen, 2001; Karasek, 1979).

Flow theory (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997) considers challenge to be one of the most important situational (work) conditions of flow. Flow is described as a state of consciousness where people become totally immersed in an activity and enjoy it intensely. The occurrence of flow is most likely when people perceive a balance between the challenge of a situation and their own skills to deal with this challenge (e.g., Clarke & Haworth, 1994). Flow theory, however, does not provide a clear definition of challenge.

Challenging job characteristics have been best defined in the context of management development. The management development literature views challenging jobs in terms of a set of developmental job aspects (e.g., McCall, Lombardo, & Morrison, 1988; McCauley et al., 1994; McCauley, et al., 1999). McCauley and colleagues identified five clusters of job components that represent challenging aspects of work: (a) job transitions, with individuals being confronted with new tasks and situations in which existing tactics and routines are inadequate, (b) creating change, with individuals having a clear goal to change a situation, but a loosely defined role that gives them the freedom to determine how to accomplish the goal, (c) managing at high levels of responsibility, characterized by increased visibility, the opportunity to make a significant impact, dealing with broader and more complex problems, and higher stakes, (d) managing boundaries, in which case employees have to work with people over whom they have no direct authority and have to develop strategies for influencing them and gaining their cooperation, and (e) dealing with diversity, that is, working with people who are different from themselves regarding their values, backgrounds, experiences, and needs.

Although these challenging job characteristics particularly concern managerial jobs, Van Vianen and colleagues (2008) have noted that most of these are applicable to non-managerial jobs as well. They stated that an assignment can be qualified as challenging to the extent that the task: (a) is new and asks for non-routine skills and behaviors, (b) tests one’s abilities or resources, (c) gives an individual the freedom to determine how to accomplish the task, and (d) involves a higher level of responsibility and visibility. In the present dissertation, I mainly focus on this conceptualization of job challenge.

Job Challenge as a Cognitive Appraisal or Mood State

Literature on work (re-)design that is typically concerned with job characteristics describes job challenge in terms of the use and development of skills, talents, or capacities.
Hackman and Oldham (1976), for example, defined job challenge as “the degree to which a job requires a variety of different activities in carrying out the work, which involves the use of a number of different skills and talents of the person” (p. 257). In concordance with this definition of job challenge, several researchers conceptualized job challenge as the appraisal of skill use, skill variety, or learning. For instance, Cuneen and Sidwell (1994) defined job challenge as “an opportunity to learn new skills and apply theoretical concepts to the work world”. Walsh and colleagues (1980) defined job challenge as “the degree to which the knowledge, skills, and abilities of the role incumbent are engaged or enlarged by the job” (p. 255), and Jones and James (1979) described job challenge as “the extent to which a job gives the individual a chance to use his skills or abilities” (p. 212).

Literature on stress considers challenge to be a cognitive appraisal of the situation. For instance, the challenge-threat literature usually conceptualizes challenge as “appraising a situation as having the potential for growth, mastery, or gain” (Folkman & Lazarus, 1985, p.152). In addition, this research domain has associated job challenge with pleasurable emotions such as eagerness, excitement, and exhilaration (e.g., Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). In a similar vein, Meyer and Allen (1988) defined job challenge as “the extent to which the job is challenging and exciting” (p. 198).

The above suggests that job challenge can be conceived of as a characteristic of the job, a cognitive appraisal, and a mood state. Although these conceptualizations clearly differ with respect to the chosen perspective, they all seem to fit into a work characteristic - psychological state model of job challenge. To clarify, a specific work characteristic, such as for example novelty of the task, can induce psychological states, such as the appraisal of a situation as being developmental (cognitive appraisal), and/or a state of excitement (physiological arousal). Thus, the different viewpoints and definitions of job challenge may well coexist.

**Individual Differences in Job Challenge**

Individuals who hold a similar job can differ considerably regarding the quality or content of their job (Quinones, Ford, & Teachout, 1995; Tesluk & Jacobs, 1998), especially the extent to which they have challenging experiences (e.g., De Pater et al., 2010; De Pater, Van Vianen, Fischer et al., 2009). The question, then, is what causes these individual differences in job challenge. As both employees (Bell & Staw, 1989; De Pater, Van Vianen, Fischer et al., 2009; De Pater, Van Vianen, Humphrey, Sleeth, & Hartman, 2009; Graen, Orris, & Johnson, 1973; Terborg, 1981) and supervisors (Bell & Staw, 1989; Graen et al., 1973; De Pater, Van Vianen, Humphrey et al., 2009) largely influence employees’ job content, we will focus on both employee and supervisor factors that impact upon employees’ challenging activities.
Individual Characteristics and Job Challenge

Research on job challenge has mainly focused on two individual factors to explain individual differences in job challenge: gender and individuals’ motivational orientations. Of these two factors, gender has received the most attention.

**Gender and job challenge.** Several studies have shown that women encounter fewer challenging experiences in their jobs than their male counterparts (De Pater, Van Vianen, Fischer et al., 2009; Lyness & Schrader, 2006; Ohlott, Ruderman, & McCauley, 1994; Van Velsor & Hughes, 1990; Woodall, Edwards, & Welchman, 1997). More specifically, these studies revealed that women’s jobs, as compared to men’s jobs, involved less risk, lower visibility, and less opportunities to create change (Van Velsor & Hughes, 1990; Ohlott et al., 1994).

One explanation for the gender differences in job challenge is that women are less motivated than men to engage in challenging assignments (Dickerson & Taylor, 2000) or to seek challenging organizational roles (Lyness & Schrader, 2006) due to their lower self-efficacy. Research (De Pater, Van Vianen, Fischer et al., 2009; De Pater, Van Vianen, Humphrey et al., 2009), however, did not support this proposition and found, instead, that individuals’ achievement motivation could explain gender differences in the choice to perform challenging tasks.

**Motivational orientations and job challenge.** In achievement situations, individuals are aware of the fact that their performance can or will be compared with some standard of excellence (Cooper, 1983). Therefore, their behaviors will be oriented toward demonstrating high ability (approach motive) or avoiding to demonstrate low ability (avoidance motive) (Nicholls, 1984). An avoidance motivation reflects an individual’s desire to avoid failure (Atkinson, 1957) and subsequent negative judgments of one’s competence (Hirschfeld, Thomas, & Lankau, 2006). People high in avoidance motivation are less willing to perform achievement tasks and more easily change to non-achievement tasks than individuals low in motive to avoid failure (Atkinson & Birch, 1974). Moreover, an avoidance motivation has been associated with disengagement from challenging situations (Elliot, 1999). In contrast, an approach motivation reflects one’s tendency to strive toward achieving challenging standards of task performance (Hirschfeld et al., 2006) and direct one’s behaviors toward the attainment of success (Elliot, 1999). People high in approach motivation are more responsive to achievement cues and are more likely to perform achievement tasks than individuals low in motive to approach success (Atkinson & Birch, 1974), and may thus be more likely to perform challenging assignments. Research (De Pater, Van Vianen, Fischer et al., 2009; De Pater, Van Vianen, Humphrey et al., 2009) indeed showed that an approach motivation is related to individuals’ choice to perform challenging tasks, whereas an avoidance motivation is related to the choice to perform non-challenging tasks.

Another important theory on individuals’ motivational orientations is goal orientation theory (e.g., Dweck, 1999; Nicholls, 1984). Goal orientation refers to the underlying goals
that people adopt and pursue in achievement situations (Dweck, 1986; Dweck & Leggett, 1988). Goal orientation distinguishes two goal orientations: a mastery or learning goal orientation and a performance goal orientation. In goal orientation research the terms mastery goal orientation and learning goal orientation are used interchangeably. In the present dissertation, we will use the term mastery goal orientation. Mastery-oriented individuals focus on the development of competence through task mastery, whereas performance-oriented individuals focus on demonstrating and validating their competence and not performing worse than others (Elliot, 1999; VandeWalle, Cron, & Slocum, 2001). Mastery oriented individuals are open to and interested in learning from new experiences (VandeWalle et al., 2001) and perceive challenging activities as opportunities to learn (Dweck, 1986). In contrast, performance oriented individuals tend to prevent the risk of being viewed as incompetent by others and they are therefore thought to avoid challenging situations (e.g., Elliot, 1999; Dweck, 1986). Based on the above, it can be expected that a mastery orientation is positively and a performance orientation is negatively associated with the performance of challenging tasks. However, to date, empirical evidence for these propositions is scarce. One study (Dragoni et al., 2009) examined the relationship between mastery orientation and having challenging developmental experiences among junior managers, and indeed showed a positive relationship between mastery orientation and challenging, developmental experiences. This study, however, did not examine the relationship between performance orientation and job challenge.

Despite the widespread study of goal orientation, the literature on this construct represents conceptual inconsistency about the stability of the construct (DeShon & Gillespie, 2005). For example, extant research on goal orientations has viewed goal orientations as a trait (e.g., Ames & Archer, 1988; VandeWalle, 1997; VandeWalle, Ganesan, Challagalla, & Brown, 2000), as a state that can be influenced by situational characteristics (e.g., Harackiewicz, Barron, Carter, Leto, & Elliot, 1997; Jagacinsky & Nicholls, 1984), or did not address this issue (e.g., Bunderson & Sutcliffe, 2003; Elliot & Harackiewicz, 1994; 1996). In the current study, we focus on the conceptualization of goal orientation as a somewhat stable individual difference variable (quasi-trait) that may be (temporarily) influenced by situational characteristics (e.g., Button, Mathieu, Zajac, 1996; Dweck, 1989; Farr, Hoffmann, & Ringenbach, 1993).

Interestingly, lately researchers have combined theories on achievement motives and goal orientation by distinguishing mastery and performance goal orientations into approach and avoidance versions (e.g., Elliot & McGregor, 2001). Individuals with mastery-approach goal orientations focus on the development of competence through task mastery and gaining new skills, which is largely in line with the conceptualization of the traditional mastery orientation. Individuals with mastery-avoidance goal orientations strive to avoid deterioration, losing their skill, or leaving the task incomplete or un-mastered. Likewise, performance-oriented individuals can be motivated either to demonstrate superior competence relative to
others and obtain favorable judgments about their achievements (performance-approach goal orientation), or to avoid demonstrating inferior competence relative to others and receiving negative judgments about their achievements (performance-avoidance goal orientation) (e.g., Elliot, 1999; Elliot & Church, 1997; VandeWalle, 1997). To date, no goal orientation research has actually examined relationships between different goal orientations and the extent to which employees perform challenging tasks (for an overview, see Elliot, 2005; Payne, Youngcourt, Beaubien; 2007). Therefore, in the present dissertation, I will address this issue and examine the relationships between individuals’ goal orientations and the performance of challenging tasks.

The Supervisor and Employee Job Challenge

Whether or not employees have challenging experiences will also depend on the behaviors of their supervisors, as supervisors may facilitate employees’ challenging experiences by the assignment or delegation of challenging tasks (Cianni & Romberger, 1995; De Pater et al., 2010). Some sparse studies have examined why supervisors assign challenging tasks to some subordinates and not to others. One experimental study (Mai-Dalton & Sullivan, 1981) has found that supervisors assign more challenging tasks to same-sex subordinates as compared to opposite-sex subordinates. More recently, De Pater and colleagues (2010) have shown that supervisors were more inclined to provide challenging tasks to male rather than female subordinates.

Van Vianen and colleagues (2008) proposed that because delegating assignments to subordinates involves a certain risk for the supervisor (Van de Vliert & Smith, 2004), supervisors will try to reduce that risk by delegating challenging assignments exclusively to those subordinates they trust to be both willing and able to perform well. Indeed, research (De Pater et al., 2010) indicated that supervisors were inclined to assign challenging tasks to those employees they considered to be ambitious and well performers. Although it has been suggested that supervisor characteristics may also influence the delegation of challenging tasks (e.g., Klein & Ziegert, 2004), to date, no study has examined supervisor characteristics that influence the types of tasks their subordinates perform. Therefore, in the present dissertation, I will explore the possible link between supervisor characteristics and their task assignment behaviors. Specifically, I will examine possible relationships between supervisors’ goal orientations and the extent to which their subordinates perform challenging tasks.

Consequences of Job Challenge

To date, most research on job challenge has focused on individual outcomes of job challenge, that is, on managerial development and learning, career success, and job attitudes.
Job Challenge and Career Success

Managers consider challenging experiences as one of the most important prerequisites of their career success (e.g., Lyness & Thompson, 1997; 2000; McCall et al., 1988; Van Velsor & Hughes, 1990). Indeed, job challenge has found to be beneficial for employees’ career development. For instance, Berlew and Hall (1966) showed that the degree of challenge present within employees’ first organizational assignments exerts a direct effect upon the levels of performance displayed throughout their careers. In a similar vein, Bray, Campbell, and Grant (1974) revealed that individuals’ job challenge in the first years on their job was positively associated with their management level eight years later.

Researchers (Berlew & Hall, 1966; Taylor, 1981) have theorized that initial job challenge affects career success and future career performance through motivation, that is, individuals working on challenging assignments are thought to internalize high standards for their performance and positive job attitudes after experiencing the intrinsic and extrinsic rewards which accompany success on a challenging task. These standards and attitudes were believed to generalize to later task assignments and to motivate people to maintain high performance levels throughout their careers. Moreover, challenging tasks have been found to enhance people’s range of interests, tolerance of uncertainty, and inner work standards (Berlew & Hall, 1966; Taylor, 1981), which are crucial assets for performing in management positions (London, 2002; McCauley et al., 1994).

Another explanation may be that the performance of challenging tasks is perceived of as a signal indicating employees’ levels of ability (Humphrey, 1985), willingness to exert effort (Van Scotter, Motowidlo, & Cross, 2000), and their ambition for reaching higher-level positions (De Pater, Van Vianen, Bechtoldt et al., 2009). Research indeed indicated that employees’ challenging job experiences are an important source for supervisory and organizational evaluations of employees’ promotability over and above employees’ tenure and current job performance (De Pater, Van Vianen, Bechtoldt et al., 2009) and that evaluations of employees’ promotability are regarded as important indicators of actual promotions and career success (Van Scotter et al., 2000; Wayne, Liden, Kraimer, & Graf, 1999).

A third explanation for the positive impact of job challenge on people’s careers is that challenging assignments are found to be important for the development of sources of organizational power, such as visibility to others, effective interpersonal networks, and resource availability within and outside the organization (Melamed, 1995), which can be regarded as important for managerial advancement (Hurley & Sonnenfeld, 1998). Finally, job challenge is likely to be related to career success, as job challenge is one of the most important determinants of learning and management development (e.g., McCall et al., 1988; McCauley et al., 1994; McCauley et al., 1999).
CHAPTER ONE

Job Challenge, Managerial Development, and On-the-Job Learning

Research on management development has consistently shown that performing challenging assignments is an important prerequisite for learning and managerial development. For example, DeRue and Wellman (2009) showed that developmental challenge resulted in leadership skill development, and a study by Dragoni and colleagues (2009) showed that challenging assignments were positively related to junior managers’ end-state competencies.

Several processes may explain why challenging experiences result in managerial development. First, challenging assignments provide employees with the opportunity and motivation to learn (McCaulley et al., 1994). Challenging assignments often involve confrontations with new situations in which existing tactics and routines are inadequate. In order to perform well, employees need to develop new strategies and skills (Davies & Easterby-Smith, 1984, McCall et al., 1988; Nicholson & West, 1988). Challenging assignments thus provide a platform for trying new behavior or reframing old ways of thinking or acting, and facilitate the practice of underdeveloped skills (McCaulley et al., 1994). Moreover, challenging experiences are believed to facilitate skill development by motivating employees to exert extra effort to acquire the skills demanded of them (Kanfer & Ackerman, 1989).

Second, challenging assignments improve cognitive and strategic skills as employees have to think critically about the assignment, identify the underlying causes and consequences of problems, and process new and ambiguous information (Cox & Cooper, 1988; DeRue & Wellman, 2009; Gillen & Carrol, 1985). Finally, the accomplishments of challenging tasks are expected to increase crucial assets for managerial development, such as employees’ self-esteem (Davies & Easterby-Smith, 1984), ambition for higher management positions (Van Vianen, 1999), and self-efficacy regarding their managerial potential (Maurer & Tarulli, 1994).

Job Challenge and Job Attitudes

Several studies suggest that individuals are particularly attracted to organizations that offer jobs and tasks that are challenging rather than non-challenging (Boswell et al., 2003; Slaughter, et al., 2006), and that job challenge is positively related to employees’ job satisfaction (e.g., Cammann, Fichman, Jenkins, & Klesh, 1983; Carmeli, Cohen-Meitar, & Elizur, 2007; James & Jones, 1980; Judge, Bono, & Locke, 2000; Kirk-Brown & Wallace, 2004) and organizational commitment (e.g., Allen & Meyer, 1990; Buchanan, 1974; Cammann et al., 1983; Dixon, et al., 2005; Hall & Schneider, 1972; Meyer & Allen, 1988; Steers, 1977). In fact, it has been proposed that job challenge is a key variable in accounting for individuals’ satisfaction with their work (e.g., Kirk-Brown & Wallace, 2004) and organizational commitment (e.g., Allen & Meyer, 1990; Dixon et al., 2005; Meyer & Allen, 1988; Steers, 1977).
There are several explanations for the positive impact of job challenge on employees’ job attitudes. First, challenging jobs involve skill development and on-the-job-learning (e.g., DeRue & Wellman, 2009; Dragoni et al., 2009; McCall et al., 1988; McCauley et al., 1994), which promote competence and efficacy in approaching work-related problems (Gouillart & Kelly, 1998). Challenging jobs may thus satisfy basic, innate needs, such as the desire to acquire and exercise competence (e.g., Elliot & Dweck, 2005; Skinner, 1995) and the need for achievement (McClelland, Atkinson, Clark, & Lowell, 1953). Hence, people will be more satisfied with their job and committed to their organization. In addition, employees may also like and commit to jobs that stimulate the acquisition of new skills, competencies, and learning experiences because this is important for their employability and future career opportunities (Berlew & Hall, 1966; De Pater, Van Vianen, Bechtoldt et al., 2009; McCall et al., 1998).

Secondly, job challenge may enhance positive job attitudes because employees who are provided with challenging assignments may perceive that their organization is committed to helping them meet their individual needs, values them, and rewards them. They are, therefore, more likely to view the organization favorably and to become more committed to the organization (Buchanan, 1974; Steers, 1977). Finally, job challenge may enhance positive job attitudes because it may positively affect individuals’ positive motivational states (e.g., Csikszentmihalyi, 1990; Feldman, 2002; Houkes et al., 2003; Massimini & Carli, 1988). Challenging assignments are believed to “encourage employees to put a greater amount of their cognitive and emotional resources into their job, which usually results in greater, more meaningful job experiences” (Carmeli et al., 2007, p. 3). Empirical support for this idea stems from goal-setting research that has shown that challenging goals are likely to increase the amount of effort employees invest in goal attainment (LaPorte & Nath, 1976; Latham & Locke, 1991), and that such goals directly enhance people’s task enjoyment and interest in the task (Harackiewicz et al., 1984; Locke & Bryan, 1967).

Despite the positive impact of job challenge on employees’ job attitudes, learning and development, and career success, several researchers (e.g., Taylor, 1981; Van Vianen et al., 2008) have argued that one should be careful to put job challenge in a too positive perspective.

Negative Consequences of Job Challenge

Under certain circumstances job challenge may also have less positive or even negative consequences for employees. For instance, research has indicated that employees can be either insensitive or react negatively to challenging job characteristics such as when they experience too much autonomy and skill variety (Katz, 1978). Moreover, it has been argued that job challenge may increase incidences of job failure across employees, which may lead to several negative psychological and organizational consequences (Taylor, 1981).

Based on theories of cognitive functioning (Fiedler & Garcia, 1987; Sweller, 1988, 1994), it can be proposed that challenging work experiences place employees at a higher risk
for cognitive overload because these experiences are new and require them to cognitively deal with many factors and demands simultaneously, such as monitoring multiple tasks, performance stress because of the high performance levels, and evaluation anxieties due to the high responsibility and visibility of challenging assignments. Employees who become cognitively overloaded often exhibit symptoms, such as a lack of perspective and being unable to focus on relevant information, which may inhibit, instead of stimulate, learning and skill development (DeRue & Wellman, 2009).

Thus, although job challenge is generally considered to have beneficial outcomes, it is important to keep in mind that job challenge may also have negative outcomes. Actually, both high and low challenging assignments may have their pros and cons, that is, high challenging tasks offer opportunities for learning but could be stressful, whereas low challenging tasks are comfortable (as long as job demands are not too low) but could lead to deactivation and lower effort. Given that organizations provide their employees with low and high challenging assignments, it is thus important to examine factors that may influence the relationship between challenging assignments and outcomes of these assignments.

To date, little is known about factors that may moderate the relationship between job challenge and employee outcomes. Therefore, in the present dissertation, I address this issue by investigating the moderating role of goal orientation on the relationship between challenging assignments and employees’ job attitudes. As I described earlier, people’s goal orientations are likely to influence the amount of challenging tasks that people perform. I propose that employees’ goal orientations may also influence their reactions to challenging assignments. Therefore, in the present dissertation, I will also investigate employees’ goal orientations as possible moderators in the relationship between the performance of challenging tasks and its psychological consequences.

**Overview of the Present Dissertation**

The objective of the present dissertation is to broaden our knowledge about job challenge by investigating the concept of job challenge, antecedents and outcomes of job challenge, as well as possible moderators that may influence the relationship between job challenge and its consequences.

In Chapter 2, we examine the relationship between employees’ challenging assignments, on-the-job-learning, and turnover intentions, job-search behaviors, and actual voluntary turnover. Specifically, we propose and test a model in which challenging assignments lead to on-the-job learning, which in turn decreases employees’ turnover intentions and job-search behaviors. Using a two-wave study design, we examine the impact of challenging assignments on employees’ learning, turnover intentions, job-search behaviors, and actual voluntary turnover over a two-year time period. As job experiences, such as challenging assignments and on-the-job learning, are likely to change over time (McDaniel, Schmidt, & Hunter, 1988), we examine the impact of changes in challenging assignments and
on-the-job learning on voluntary turnover over and above the impact of initial turnover intentions and job-search behaviors. We examine these relationships in a field study among 689 employees working in health care and welfare organizations in the Netherlands.

Chapter 3 describes a laboratory study that examined whether and how the inducement of individuals’ goal orientation (mastery-approach vs. performance-approach vs. no orientation) while performing an assigned high or low challenging task influences their affective responses and task motivation. Considering one’s affective responses, we will focus on positive and negative activating mood states, because challenge is associated with positive moods such as being active and alert (e.g., Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Meyer and Allen, 1988) as well as with negative moods, such as feeling nervous, tensed, and stressed (Boswell, Olson-Buchanan, & Le Pine, 2004; McCauley et al., 1994). We will argue that performing a high challenging assignment leads to better mood (high positive, low negative) and higher motivation with a mastery-approach orientation than with a performance-approach orientation, or no goal orientation. We will also argue that performing a low challenging assignment leads to better mood (high positive, low negative) and higher motivation with a performance-approach orientation than with a mastery-approach orientation, or no goal orientation. In order to enhance external validity, we have developed realistic (non-)challenging assignments for the study sample consisting of a total of 179 students.

The purpose of Chapter 4 is to examine the extent to which the performance of challenging tasks is related to employees’ and supervisor’s goal orientations. We will draw on recent goal orientation theory and research (e.g., Elliot & McGregor, 2001; Janssen & Prins, 2007) that focuses on four goal orientations: performance-approach orientations, performance-avoidance orientations, mastery-approach orientations, and mastery-avoidance orientations. Specifically, Study 4.1 examines the impact of employees’ own goal orientations on the extent to which they perform challenging assignments. Study 4.2 investigates the impact of supervisors’ goal orientations on the extent to which employees perform challenging assignments. Study 4.1 concerns a two-wave field study among 216 students. Study 4.2 concerns a sample of 39 supervisors and 193 employees working for an industrial organization at six locations.

In Chapter 5, we aim to reach a better understanding and conceptualization of job challenge by exploring and categorizing the aspects that lay persons, other than researchers, consider to be challenging. Specifically, in a qualitative study, we asked participants to describe a task they recently performed and experienced as challenging and then asked them to describe why they considered this task to be challenging. We used concept mapping to analyze and categorize participants’ responses. Concept mapping is a technique that is widely used for specifying conceptual frameworks (Trochim, 1989) and coding qualitative data aimed at scale development (Jackson & Trochim, 2002). Finally, based on the results, we will propose a categorization of challenging job aspects.
The central aim of Chapter 6 is to develop and validate a reliable, theoretically sound instrument to assess perceived job challenge, the *Perceived Job Challenge Measure* (PJCM). We generated items based on the results of Chapter 5. The PJCM was tested in two studies for which data was collected among employees from different organizations in the Netherlands. In Study 6.1, we investigate the underlying factor structure of the measure and its reliability among 222 employees. In Study 6.2, we again test the factor structure and internal consistency of the measure in a sample of 468 employees. We furthermore examine its test-retest reliability over a six-month time interval and its convergent, discriminant, and concurrent validities. The convergent validity will be examined by relating the PJCM to extant measures of job challenge and variables that are closely related to job challenge. We examine the discriminant validity of the PJCM by investigating relationships between the PJCM subscales and measures that are expected not to relate to perceived job challenge. The concurrent validity of the PJCM is tested by examining relationships between the PJCM and job satisfaction, affective commitment, turnover intentions, and job performance.

In Chapter 7, I will summarize and integrate the results of the studies that are reported in this dissertation. Furthermore, I will discuss the implications for theory and practice, the limitations of the present dissertation, and I will propose avenues for future research.

Finally, I would like to note that Chapters 2 through 6 have been prepared as separate journal articles and therefore may be read independently.