Challenge at work: a matter of give and take
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SUMMARY

Job challenge is highly relevant for employees and their organizations. Jobs can be qualified as being challenging to the extent that the job: (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 tasks, and (d) involves a higher level of responsibility and visibility (Van Vianen, De Pater, & Preenen, 2008). Research has shown that job challenge is a key factor influencing individuals’ job-choice decisions (e.g., Slaughter, Richard, & Martin, 2006), managerial development (e.g., Dragoni, Tesluk, Russell, & Oh, 2009), career advancement (e.g., De Pater, Van Vianen, Bechtoldt, & Klehe, 2009), and job attitudes (e.g., Huang, Lawler, & Lei, 2007).

Despite the growing amount of research on job challenge, many issues remain to be examined. First, little research attention has been given to possible negative outcomes of job challenge (Van Vianen et al., 2008). For example, little is known about the relationship between job challenge and voluntary turnover. Because job challenge stimulates the learning of new skills (e.g., Dragoni et al., 2009) and increases employees’ human capital, this may lead to better opportunities for employment in other organizations (Ito & Brotheridge, 2005). Investigating the consequences of job challenge for voluntary turnover thus seems warranted. Second, there is little research investigating factors that influence the types of tasks that people perform in their jobs. Both employees themselves and supervisors will influence the extent to which employees encounter challenging tasks in their jobs (De Pater, Van Vianen, & Bechtoldt, 2010). In addition, past research has neglected possible individual moderators of the relationships between job challenge and outcomes. Last, 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., 2009) whereas other researchers examined job challenge as a subjective cognitive experience or state (e.g., Huang et al., 2007).

Accordingly, the aim of the present dissertation was to provide a better understanding of the conceptualization, antecedents, processes, and outcomes of job challenge.

Summary of Main Findings

This dissertation comprises five empirical chapters (Chapters 2 to 6) with seven studies employing multiple samples and research methods. Below, I will provide a short summary of the main findings in this dissertation.

Chapter 2 examined relationships between employees’ challenging tasks, on-the-job learning, turnover intentions, job-search behaviors, and voluntary turnover. Based on research on the attractiveness and positive outcomes of challenging jobs and extant theories about learning, we hypothesized that challenging tasks would reduce withdrawal intentions and behaviors, and that on-the-job learning would explain this relationship. Because people’s job
experiences and on-the-job learning will likely change over time, we also investigated within a two-year period how changes in challenging tasks and on-the-job learning affected actual voluntary turnover. We expected that an increase in challenging tasks and learning would result in lower voluntary turnover and that a decrease in challenging tasks and learning would lead to higher voluntary turnover.

The results confirmed our propositions. Challenging tasks were negatively related to turnover intentions and job-search behaviors, which was due to the mediating role of on-the-job learning. In addition, a change in challenging tasks was negatively related to voluntary turnover above and beyond Time 1 turnover intentions and job-search behaviors. This relationship implies that an increase in challenging tasks resulted in lower voluntary turnover even when employees had initial turnover intentions. In a similar vein, a decrease in challenging tasks resulted in higher voluntary turnover even when employees initially did not have the intention to leave the organization. Changes in on-the-job learning could largely explain these findings. All in all, challenging tasks enhance on-the-job learning which, in turn, reduces voluntary turnover. Therefore, organizations should encourage job challenge in order to retain their valuable employees.

Chapter 3 examined the joint impact of task challenge and goal orientation (as experimentally induced) on individuals’ positive and negative activating moods and motivation. Goal orientation refers to the underlying goals that people adopt and pursue in achievement situations (Dweck & Leggett, 1988). Individuals with a mastery-approach goal orientation aim to further develop their competence through task mastery and the learning of new skills. Performance-approach oriented individuals are motivated to demonstrate superior competence relative to others and obtain favorable judgments about their achievements (e.g., Elliot, 2001).

We hypothesized that mastery-approach and performance-approach orientations would affect individual’s moods and motivational responses to high and low challenging tasks, respectively. Low challenging tasks are routine and easy to perform, and require relatively little to learn during task performance, which opposes a mastery-approach orientation. Yet, a low challenging task may fit a performance-approach orientation that motivates individuals to outperform others and to show their superior competence. Therefore, we expected that people’s activating moods (positive and negative) and motivation would be higher when performing a low challenging task with a performance-approach orientation instead of a mastery-approach orientation. With regard to the performance of a challenging task, we proposed that a mastery-approach orientation would positively activate and motivate people, without causing high negative affect. A performance-approach orientation was expected to negatively influence people’s mood states and motivation. People are more likely to experience higher levels of tension and lower levels of positive activating mood when their performances are compared to those of others, particularly when they have to perform well on a task that they have not fully mastered yet. Moreover, people with a performance-approach
orientation may lose attentional resources as caused by their focus on external cues (Kanfer & Ackerman, 1989), which in turn, may mentally block them to put effort in the challenging task.

We tested our propositions in a laboratory setting in which participants were randomly assigned a realistic low or high challenging task and were provided with a general or goal-oriented (performance-approach or mastery-approach) task instruction. The study findings largely supported our hypotheses. We found that a performance-approach orientation resulted in higher positive activating mood and motivation than a mastery-approach orientation or no goal orientation in the low challenging task condition. In contrast, a mastery-approach orientation led to higher positive activating mood and motivation than a performance-approach orientation or no goal orientation in the high challenging task condition. These findings suggest that employees may benefit from a performance-approach orientation when performing low challenging assignments. In contrast, employees may benefit from a mastery-approach orientation when performing high challenging assignments. We did not find an interaction between task challenge and goal orientation on negative activating mood. However, individuals performing a high challenging task reported more negative activated mood states than those performing a low challenging task. Hence, higher negative activating mood seems to be a natural response to challenging tasks and cannot be precluded by specific task instructions.

Chapter 4 examined the extent to which the performance of challenging tasks is related to employees’ and supervisors’ goal orientations. In Study 4.1, we investigated the relationships between people’s goal orientations and the performance of challenging tasks among students. Students with a mastery-approach goal orientation were expected to engage in challenging activities because these activities facilitate their goal to develop their competencies. In contrast, individuals with a performance-avoidance orientation are particularly motivated to avoid demonstrating inferior competence toward others (e.g., Elliot, 1999). We therefore expected that students with a performance-avoidance orientation would avoid challenging activities because of a higher risk of visible failure. The findings indeed showed a positive relationship between individuals’ mastery-approach orientation and the performance of challenging tasks. However, no relationship was found between a performance-avoidance orientation and the performance of challenging tasks.

In Study 4.2, we proposed that supervisors’ goal orientations would relate to the types of tasks employees perform, but that the strength of this relationship would depend on the influence that supervisors have on the content of employees’ jobs (supervisors’ task impact). We used a sample of 39 supervisors and 193 employees working for an industrial organization at six locations. Based on goal orientation theory, we reasoned that employees’ performance of challenging tasks would relate to supervisors’ mastery-approach, performance-approach, and performance-avoidance orientations. We argued that supervisors with a mastery-approach orientation may find the development of new competencies as
important for themselves as for their subordinates. These supervisors may provide their employees with actual learning opportunities by assigning challenging tasks. In contrast, supervisors with a performance-approach orientation may be less likely to stimulate their employees to take on challenging tasks because the supervisors want to shine themselves. Performance-avoidant supervisors, on the other hand, are motivated to avoid demonstrating inferior competence relative to others and receiving negative judgments about their achievements (Elliot & McGregor, 2001). These supervisors may pass on challenging and risky activities to their employees.

As in Study 4.1, we found that employees’ mastery-approach orientation was positively related to performing challenging tasks. Furthermore, we found that supervisors’ goal orientations were related to employees’ performance of challenging tasks. Employees who were dependent on their supervisors’ task assignments performed fewer challenging tasks when their supervisor had a higher performance-approach orientation. Employees performed more challenging assignments when their supervisor had a high performance-avoidance orientation. Our proposition that supervisors’ mastery-approach goal orientation would be positively related to employees’ performance of challenging tasks was not confirmed.

The aim of Chapter 5 was to reach a grounded, bottom-up understanding and conceptualization of job challenge. We asked 132 respondents to describe a task they recently performed and considered to be challenging, and to explain why they found this task challenging. We used concept mapping to analyze and categorize participants’ responses. Our analyses showed that job challenge is a multi-faceted construct. Thirty-seven aspects of job challenge were distinguished and categorized as task characteristic, contextual characteristic, cognitive appraisal, and mood state. These four conceptualizations were integrated into a comprehensive model of job challenge in which task and contextual characteristics are proposed as antecedents of cognitive appraisals and mood states (see Figure 5.2).

\textbf{Figure 5.2.} Job challenge model
Chapter 6 describes the development and validation of a reliable, theoretically well-grounded measure of perceived job challenge. We generated the cognitive appraisal and mood state items from the concept mapping analysis as described in Chapter 5. In two studies, we examined the psychometric quality of this set of items. Based on our findings as described in Chapter 5, we expected that perceived job challenge would be a two-dimensional concept including cognitive appraisals and mood states. Study 6.1 showed three instead of two factors: positive stimulation, competence testing, and uncertainty. The positive stimulation factor included items that refer to positive mood states and attitudes associated with job challenge. The competence testing factor included items related to being tested and having to stretch and prove oneself. The uncertainty factor included items referring to feelings of risk of failure, perceptions of task difficulty, and new experiences. Apparently, the mood states associated with challenge comprise a positive (positive stimulation) and negative component (uncertainty). The three subscales of perceived job challenge were found to be internally reliable.

The psychometric characteristics of the resulting Perceived Job Challenge Measure (PJCM) were further tested in a second study (Study 6.2). Its three-factor structure was confirmed. The reliabilities of the three subscales were good. The test-retest reliabilities of the PJCM subscales as measured over a six-month time interval were moderate. We also tested the convergent, discriminant, and concurrent validities of the PJCM. The convergent validity was examined by relating the PJCM to extant measures that are theoretically related to job challenge. In addition, we examined whether the PJCM was related to autonomy and skill variety. The results supported the convergent validity of the PJCM because it correlated moderately high to high with other job challenge measures, job autonomy, and skill variety. The discriminant validity of the PJCM was examined by correlating the PJCM subscales with neuroticism and agreeableness because these Big Five traits were expected to be unrelated to perceived job challenge. The relationships between the subscales of the PJCM and these traits were indeed mainly not significant, providing evidence for adequate discriminant validity. The concurrent validity of the PJCM was tested by examining its relationship with job satisfaction, affective commitment, turnover intentions, and job performance. The concurrent validity of the PJCM was supported. Moderate to high correlations between the three subscales and job attitudes were found. In addition, the positive stimulation scale correlated positively with supervisor-rated job satisfaction and affective commitment. Altogether, the results of these two studies suggest that the PJCM is a reliable and valid measure.

Conclusion

In closing, the studies described in the five empirical chapters of this dissertation examined the conceptualization, antecedents, processes, and outcomes of job challenge. These studies have increased our understanding of job challenge in multiple ways. First, job challenge is a broad concept including task and context characteristics, and people’s
subjective perceptions of challenge as positive stimulation, competence testing, and uncertainty. Second, people’s goal orientations are not only important for task choices but also for the motivational and mood outcomes of performing challenging tasks. People with a mastery-approach orientation tend to choose challenging tasks and, when challenged, they show more positive affective and motivational reactions. Third, supervisors’ goal orientations tend to influence employees’ opportunities for performing challenging tasks. Performance-approach oriented supervisors could withhold their employees from challenging experiences which, in turn, may undermine employees’ learning and development. Finally, because of its positive influence on on-the-job learning, job challenge will decrease rather than increase voluntary turnover.

Certainly, many questions remain to be answered and the studies in this dissertation have raised several new, interesting, and exciting questions. These questions may hopefully challenge other researchers to further explore the scientifically interesting and practically relevant concept of job challenge.