

INFLUENCE OF JOB CHARACTERISTICS ON PROMOTIVE VOICE BEHAVIOR

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Abstract

The objective of this paper is to clarify the influence of job characteristics on promotive voice. Based on the reviews of relevant research, this paper proposes that the theoretical hypothesis that various dimensions of job characteristics are positively related to promotive voice. In order to test the hypothesis, the questionnaires were designed on the basis of widely accepted mature scales to carry out paired questionnaire survey of superiors and subordinates by stratified sampling according to different types of job positions in 24 enterprises. 437 sets of data were collected and then analyzed by the statistic software SPSS to verify the hypothesis. As a result, the survey data supported the hypothesis of positive correlation between different dimensions of job characteristics and promotive voice. Therefore, this paper proposes to improve job characteristics to enhance promotive voice for organizations.

Keywords: Promotive voice, Job characteristics, Work design

Introduction

Rapid growth of mobile internet in recent years has changed the way people get information and the speed of information spreading. On the one hand, the knowledge stored by an individual become increasingly limited. On the other hand, it becomes more and more difficult to limit information spreading. The way that enterprises are usually managed on basis of information asymmetry and knowledge advantage encounters increasing challenges. From the perspective of voice, the prerequisite of voice lies in that the employee has better judgment than his or her superior, whether it is promotive voice or prohibitive voice (Liang & Farh, 2008). Obviously, the development of mobile internet helps improve the voice ability of employees. Whether it is based on the EVL (exit-voice-loyalty) model (Hirschman, 1970) or EVLN (exit-voice-loyalty-neglect) model (Rusbult & Farrell, 1988), impeded channel for voice is detrimental to enterprises. Particularly in recent years, many factors such as dramatic change of external environment and application of new technology in management, call for the reform and innovation in organizations. The voice from employees becomes increasingly important for the development of organizations in the process of innovation. The employees' promotive voice about how to improve the strength of the enterprise to form core competitiveness becomes particularly urgent. Up to date, there are few studies on promotive voice. Promotive voice and prohibitive voice used to be collectively called voice behavior (Liang & Farh, 2008). Therefore, studies focusing on voice behavior can provide reference for

this research. In practice, it seems that there are differences in promotive voice from employees of various job positions. For instance, promotive voices are more frequent for the positions with higher requirements for innovation, while there are in general less promotive voices for the positions with routine job duties. There is no systematic research on the influence of job characteristics on promotive voice among the existing studies. Thus, this study attempts to improve the employee's promotive voice from the perspective of job characteristics with an aim to contribute to studies on voice behavior and to provide theoretical reference for enterprises to improve work design to facilitate promotive voice from employees.

Literature review and hypotheses

Voice behavior

Existing academic studies on voice behavior are mainly involved in three perspectives: the individual, the organization and the leadership. Studies from the perspective of individuals mainly focus on the effect of individual psychological factors (LePine & Van Dyne, 1998; Frese, Teng & Wijnen, 1999; Premeaux & Bedeian, 2003; Fuller, Barnett, Hester, Relyea & Frey, 2007; Duan Jinyun & Wei Qiujiang, 2012; Duan Jinyun & Zhang Qian, 2015), individual demographic characteristics (LePine & Van Dyne, 1998; Detert & Burris, 2007; Stamper & Van Dyne, 2001, and individual personality characteristics (LePine & Van Dyne, 2001; Crant, Kim, & Wang, 2011; Nikolaou, Vakola, & Bourantas, 2008)

on voice behavior. The researches from the perspective of organizations focus on organizational justice (Morrison & Elizabeth, 2011), organizational security and organizational culture (Farh, Hackett, & Liang, 2007; Hsiung, 2012) etc. And the studies from the perspective of leadership mainly concern different styles of leadership, including transformational, authoritarian, ethical and humble leadership (Detert & Burris, 2007; Janssen & Van Yperen, 2004; Ma Guimei et al., 2014; Ran Xia & Yang Qian, 2015).

Hirschman first proposed in 1970 that the reason for the resignation and voice of employees lies in their dissatisfaction with the organization (Hirschman, 1970) and thus built the EVL (exit-voice-loyalty) model. However, Vandewalle, Van Dyne and Kostova (1995) regard voice as an extra-role behavior and believe that as an organizational citizenship behavior voice behavior is active and good for the organization, which is different from the view point of Hirschman. As a result, the academic studies on voice behavior adopt different research approaches based on the above two views.

Similar to the researches of promotive voice, Motowilo, Borman and Schmit (1997) define voice behavior as a constructive interpersonal communication to improve the organizational environment when they study individual differences under varied situations and tasks. Van Dyne and LePine (1998) define voice behavior as constructive suggestions made by employees to improve the organization and such suggestions may be denied due to their challenges to the status quo. They hold that voice is a constructive

promotive behavior which brings innovative power to the reform of enterprises (LePine & Van Dyne, 1998). They later refine the definition as a constructive interpersonal communication of employees to improve the status quo and hold that such employee behavior is spontaneous (LePine & Van Dyne, 2001). They clarify that voice behavior is a reform-oriented and constructive communication committed to improve the status quo as an organizational citizenship behavior. Similarly, De Dreu and Van Vianen (2001) hold that voice is an innovation-oriented organizational citizenship behavior to finish task and express opinions. Van Dyne, Ang and Botero (2003) define voice behavior as an act of expressing opinions and comments based on cooperative motivation. Detert and Burris (2007) define it as a behavior of providing information to supervisors in order to improve organizational performance.

Laing and Farh (2008), Liang, Farh, C.I. and Farh, J.L. (2012) integrate the two different views on voice behavior and put forward two types of voice behavior: promotive voice and prohibitive voice. Promotive voice is regarded as employees' expression of new ideas or suggestions for improving the overall functioning of the work unit or organization. Prohibitive voice describes employees' expressions of concern about work practices, incidents, or employee behavior that is harmful to the organization. They also developed and modified the scale.

This proposal is widely recognized by scholars and their scale is widely adopted. The scale they make is often applied in the measurement of voice

behavior, particularly in the Chinese cultural context.

Job characteristics

As a core concept of work design, job characteristics is one of the most classical concepts in business management. Scholars have long discussed the influence of job characteristics on job performance (Tyagi, 1985; Oldham & Cummings, 1996; Fried & Ferris, 1987; Wang Zhong, Xiong Liguang & Guo Huan, 2014), on job satisfaction (Colarelli, Dean, & Konstans, 1987; Noor Azzah & Rudzi, 2010; Ali et al., 2014; Hsu & Liao, 2016), on health of employees (Charkhabi, Alimohammadi, & Charkhabi, 2014), on work input (Katrinli, Atabay, Gunay, & Guneri, 2009; Yang Hongming & Liu Yaozhong, 2012) and on organizational citizenship behavior (Krishnan et al., 2010) and so on. While voice is a kind of organizational citizenship behavior, there are so far no systematic and specific studies on the influence of job characteristics on employees' voice behaviors.

There are different scales for the measurement of job characteristics. Hackman and Oldham (1980) created the scale of JDS (Job Diagnostic Survey) to measure job characteristics, including the five core dimensions (skill variety, task identity, task significance, autonomy and feedback) and two auxiliary dimensions (others' feedback and cooperation). There are 21 questions in total, with 3 questions for each dimension. Idaszak and Drasgow (1987) analyzed the JDS scale and found there were reverse questions causing problems in the factor analysis. Therefore, they revised the

reverse scoring questions to create the revised JDS (JDS-R), with positive description for all questions. The scale still includes five core dimensions (skill variety, task identity, task significance, autonomy and feedback) and consists of 15 questions with 3 questions for each dimension. Later academic studies show that JDS-R is more accurate than JDS and thus become more widely used. For now, JDS-R created by Idaszak and Drasgow (1987) remains the most widely used scale for the measurement of job characteristics.

Hypotheses

Based on the five dimensional divisions of job characteristics proposed by Hackman and Oldham (1980), the effects of skill variety, task identity, task significance, autonomy and feedback on promotive voice are respectively analyzed.

The first dimension: skill variety. When a job requires more varieties of skills, the employees tend to have better understanding and perception of the job and improvement of job than their superiors and thus are more capable of offering promotive voice. Based on the organization member exchange theory, the employees' voice is regarded as a dedication to the organization, or expected reward from the organization or a return to previous support and care from the organization. There will surely be more promotive voice if the employees are more capable.

The second dimension: task identity: For a job with clearer task identity, the employee may have more profound understanding of the cohesion of work procedures, of the influence of work

procedures on outcome and of the bottleneck of work performance than the superiors and thus is more capable of offering voice. Based on the organization member exchange theory, it is predictable that employees are more likely to make promotive voice when they have the stronger voice ability, such as how to overcome the bottleneck of task performance and how to improve performance via enhancing cohesion of work.

The third dimension: task significance. In general, the more important a job is, the more influence the natural outcome will exert on the organization and the larger impact on employees. In another word, the more important an employee's work is, the larger influence his/her outcome will have on the organization and him or herself. Based on the organization member exchange theory, the organization's reward to employees and the improvement of organization in turn will benefit the employees. Thus, it could be inferred that the more important a job is, the employees are more inclined to make promotive voice.

The fourth dimension: autonomy. The higher autonomy an employee has in the job, he or she would have better understanding of the work outcome and approaches to the work and is more likely to attribute the work performance to individual factors such as hard work and good capacity. In addition, since the work relies more on the employee autonomy, the employee tends to have better understanding of the job, stronger sense of fulfillment and satisfaction with the work. Noticeably, they tend to have better voice capacity. Based on the organization member exchange theory, the employee tends to make more

promotive voice in return for the autonomy given by the organization and for the corresponding sense of fulfillment.

The fifth dimension: feedback. Feedback helps employees understand the correlation between the work and the outcome. It is conducive to improving the working methods, working capacity and sense of fulfillment and finally enhances capacity of promotive voice. Thus, the more feedback is received, employees tend to make more promotive voice.

Therefore, the author proposes the following hypotheses:

H1 : Skill variety is positively correlated to promotive voice.

H2 : Task identity is positively correlated to promotive voice.

H3 : Task significance is positively correlated to promotive voice.

H4 : Autonomy is positively correlated to promotive voice.

H5 : Feedback is positively correlated to promotive voice.

Research design

Scale selection

This research accepts the definition of Hackman and Oldham (1975) for job characteristics referring to the properties or features of a job or a task which consists of five dimensions: skill variety, task identity, task significance, autonomy and feedback. The JDS-R scale created by Idaszak and Drasgow (1987) is adopted to measure the five dimensions of job characteristics. The scale consists of five dimensions: skill variety, task identity,

task significance, autonomy and feedback.

According to the definition of Liang and Farh (2008), promotive voice is defined as employees' expression of new ideas or suggestions for improving the overall functioning of the work unit or organization. It is measured by the question items about promotive voice in the scale revised by Liang et al. (2012).

Data collection

The core content of the questionnaire is based on the aforementioned scales. The control variables refer to the design rules for questionnaires of relevant research. In order to avoid the homologous error, data is collected by pairing the superiors and the subordinates. Therefore, the questionnaire is divided into the superior questionnaire and the subordinate questionnaire. The superior questionnaire measures the dependent variable, namely, the promotive voice behavior of the subordinates. In order to achieve better differentiation, each copy of supervisor questionnaire simultaneously evaluates about four subordinates in the form of filling scores. The subordinate questionnaire measures the independent variables and control variables, namely, job characteristics such as age, gender, education level, etc. with the form of checking the scores. Coding was used in the questionnaire to record the pairing information.

The employees and their direct supervisors of 24 enterprises of the provinces where the researchers were located were selected for the questionnaire survey. Stratified sampling was conducted according to the types of

job. A total of 482 sets of questionnaires were distributed. 459 sets were retrieved and 437 were finally obtained with 22 invalid sets eliminated. The effective rate is 95.2%. Among the effective questionnaires, 173 (39.6%) were from men and 264 (60.4%) from women; 9 (50.1%) aged 25 and below; 159 (36.4%) aged 26-35; 53 (12.1%) were 36-45 years old, and 6 (1.4%) were older than 45. For the highest education level, 11 (2.5%) graduated from junior high school and below, 155 (35.5%) from high school or secondary school, 235 (53.8%) from university, and 36 (8.2%) as postgraduates.

Result

Reliability and validity tests

With reference to the reliability test method of Wu Minglong (2010), SPSS19.0 was used to test the reliability of the scale. The results showed that the coefficient α of skill variety, task identity, task significance, autonomy, and feedback were respectively 0.800, 0.845, 0.818, 0.848, 0.904. The coefficient α of promotive voice is 0.925. All the values reached the ideal level.

Factor analysis was used to judge the validity of the scale. SPSS19.0 was used for data analysis. According to the opinions of Wu Minglong's (2010): If the KMO is higher than 0.5, factor analysis can be made. And only when Bartlett's spherical test reach the significant, factor analysis can be carried out. The MSA should be higher than 0.5. The commonality of question items should be higher than 0.20. The factor loading should be greater than 0.50. The results of analysis are shown in Table 1.

Table 1 Test results of the validity of the questionnaire.

Scales/dimensions	Questions	MSA	Commonality	Factor loading	KMO	Sig
Skill variety	JC01	.603	.799	.906	.639	.000
	JC02	.852	.529	.894		
	JC03	.596	.820	.727		
Task identity	JC04	.723	.754	.906	.711	.000
	JC05	.664	.821	.869		
	JC06	.762	.723	.850		
Task significance	JC07	.718	.727	.881	.710	.000
	JC08	.676	.776	.853		
	JC09	.746	.702	.838		
Autonomy	JC10	.750	.745	.897	.723	.000
	JC11	.687	.804	.868		
	JC12	.740	.753	.863		
Feedback	JC13	.718	.845	.943	.725	.000
	JC14	.820	.785	.919		
	JC15	.667	.890	.886		
Promotive voice	VB01	.920	.703	.928	.843	.000
	VB02	.839	.860	.892		
	VB03	.857	.734	.880		
	VB04	.808	.796	.857		
	VB05	.812	.775	.838		

Data description

The means, variances, and correlations of the independent variables and dependent variables are shown in Table 2. As Table

2 reveals, the dimensions of job characteristics are all related to promotive voice. Their correlation coefficients are all lower than 0.7, indicating no collinearity, which provide the basis for further analysis.

Table 2 Means, Standard Deviations, Coefficients Alphas and Correlations

Variables	Means	Standard deviations	V1	V2	V3	V4	V5	V6
Skill variety	3.2563	.87420	.800(
Task Identity	3.7201	.80450	.454**	.845(
Task significance	3.5423	.84708	.288**	.544**	.818(
Autonomy	3.3043	1.02331	.393**	.618**	.460**	.848(
Feedback	3.7918	.84459	.373**	.582**	.532**	.577**	.904(
Promotive voice	3.4785	.83353	.210**	.179**	.211**	.206**	.271**	.925(

Note: * indicates significant at 0.05 level (two-tailed), ** indicates significant at 0.01 level (two-tailed), within the parenthesis is the coefficient Alphas.

Hypotheses testing

The software SPSS was used to make linear regression analysis of the correlation of job characteristics and promotive voice. With reference to Wu Minglong (2013), first layer of independent variables is occupied by

control variables, and the second layer is occupied by dimensions of job characteristics. The results are shown in Table 3. The dependent variable is promotive voice. The independent variable M1 stands for skill diversity, M2 task identity, M3 job significance, M4 autonomy, and M5 feedback.

Table 3 Regression results of promotive voice on various dimensions of job characteristic

Control variables	Dependent variable :promotive voice				
	M1	M2	M3	M4	M5
Age	.187**	.171**	.176**	.135*	.135*
Gender	.139**	.121**	.125**	.120*	.097*
Educational	.061	.071	.086	.076	.096*
Current company tenure	-.110	-.084	-.060	-.073	-.086
Independent variables	.205**	.154**	.197**	.167**	.242**
R ²	.098**	.083**	.098**	.085	.113**
ΔR ²	.038**	.022**	.037**	.025	.052**
F	7.814**	6.465**	7.781**	6.686	9.135**
ΔF	18.056**	10.450**	17.870**	11.697	25.500**

Note: * indicates significant at 0.05 level (two-tailed), ** indicates significant at 0.01 level (two-tailed)

As Table 3 shows, after controlling the influence of demographic variables, the five dimensions (skill diversity, task identity, job significance, autonomy, and feedback) of job characteristics all significantly affect the promotive voice from employees. Therefore, H1, H2, H3, H4, and H5 have all been verified, indicating that all dimensions of job characteristics are positively related to promotive voice.

Discussion and conclusion

This study examines the influence of job characteristics on promotive voice and is in line with the topic of concern of international scholars in this field. The results of empirical analysis show that the five dimensions of job characteristics are positively related to promotive voice. Compared with early scholars' concerns on variables such as age, gender, educational level, and leadership style and so on, this study explains the difference in employees' promotive voice from a new perspective. It supports the opinion emphasized by Krishnan et al. (2010) that job characteristics have significant positive impact on the organizational citizenship behaviors of employees. Thus this study expands and deepens existing research on voice behaviors.

The empirical analysis verifies that organizations can enhance employees' promotive voice by means of improving job characteristics. Concrete suggestions are provided as follows in terms of five dimensions of job characteristics.

In terms of skill variety, organizations can improve skill variety according to the

ability of employees, so as to give full play to various job skills of employees. However, excessive requirements for skill may lead to opposite effect.

In terms of task identity, organizations should weigh efficiency and quality. Although task division can bring about improvement in efficiency, it may also reduce the subjective initiative of employees. In the rapidly changing external environment, organizations should avoid subtle division of tasks to prevent employees from making an overall judgment on the basis of one-sided viewpoint. Proper task identity is conducive to offering promotive voice by employees.

In terms of task significance, it is indeed difficult to change the importance of a job position, but an employee's awareness of the importance of his/her job is not unchangeable. The practices such as supervisors' concerns about the employee's job and the timely recognition of the importance of the employee's job in public will enhance the employee's consciousness of importance of his/ her job and will further improve promotive voice. Therefore, supervisors or leaders of organizations need to bring about effective measures to enhance employees' awareness of the importance of the job.

In terms of autonomy, the organization should try its best to improve employees' job autonomy within the allowable range. As Sun Tzu's view, "A field commander must decide even against king's orders.", the present study believes that in the complex changing environment, employees need to have adequate autonomy to deal with uncertain situations. In addition to improving performance, autonomy will also

enhance employees' promotive voice. It is generally believed that autonomy may lead to deviant behaviors such as absenteeism and private activities. But the organic combination of goal orientation and autonomy can ensure that employees achieve desired performance and can also avoid employees' abuse of autonomy to cause deviant behaviors at work.

In terms of feedback, the organization should improve as much as possible the feedback speed and feedback content in order to enhance employees' promotive voice. In specific applications of feedback, the feedback of video games is considered as one of the most important incentive mechanisms. From points encouragement to progress bar, it has formed a strong attraction to participants. With the continuous development of electronic technology, various electronic wearable devices have fully applied the concept of feedback and gained extensive popularity. For example, measuring the indexes of running people has become part of the life of many sports enthusiasts. And these methods of applying new technologies to improve feedback should be the object of learning for organizations.

Research limitation and future research

Research limitations

Although adopting ways such as classic scales, paired data to ensure the reliability and validity of the research, this study has the following limitations:

Firstly, limitation in terms of industry. Because job characteristic is the

antecedent variable, individuals with differences in job characteristics are selected as samples. These samples are taken in dozens of companies in various industries. Therefore, the division and characteristics of the industry are not thoroughly considered. Although the results of the study verified most of the hypotheses, the differences between the industries have not been analyzed and discussed, so the application of the research results in specific industries cannot be judged.

Secondly, limitation in terms of organizational influence. The current related research suggests that factors such as organizational atmosphere, organizational identity, interpersonal relationship, and management style all have influence on voice behavior. However, the above factors were not included in the questionnaire for the feasibility of the research. When the data was analyzed, there is no control over the influence of the organizational level on voice behavior. Although several enterprises have been investigated, the differences between organizations may partially offset the impact of organizational factors on voice, but they cannot ensure that organizational-level influences are completely avoided.

Lastly, limitation in terms of source area of samples. All samples were collected from the Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region of China, and the City of Baise under the jurisdiction of Guangxi was the main sampling site. However, located in the southwestern border of China, Guangxi, especially Baise, is a remote mountainous area inhabited by impoverished ethnic minority. The employees in this area are less active, but relatively simple in the coastal areas of



China, the customs are relatively simple and honest compared to those of coastal area. The enterprises and employees in Guangxi must be affected by the aforementioned environment. The results of this study were based on Guangxi data and whether they can be used in other regions still need to be verified.

Future research

Considering the limitations of research, we can conduct follow-up studies in three aspects in the future: Firstly, research can be conducted to examine the samples of the same industry after an industry is selected. Analyze whether the influence

of job characteristics of the industry on enhancing promotive voice is significant. Secondly, control the factors that influence the promotive voice at the organizational level, such as organizational atmosphere, organizational identity, and interpersonal relationship. Analyze whether the hypotheses of the relation between job characteristics and promotive voice can be verified. Finally, based on the design of this study, sampling can be conducted in different regions with distinctive features to observe whether the results are significant and analyze the influence of specific regional scenarios on the relationship between job characteristics and promotive voice.

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