

Perceived Career Paths and Performance in Moderately Defined Roles: A Study of Project Managers

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Those working in jobs not clearly defined as professions often rely on organizational signals to formulate reactions regarding their jobs and career futures. Responses from 644 project managers were used to test a hypothesized Path Reaction Performance Model. Findings suggest that the relationship between perceived career path and performance is mediated by job satisfaction, career commitment, and prestige.

Keywords: Career Path, Career Development, Project Management

The lack of career advancement opportunities in careers has been researched as one of the reasons professionals become dissatisfied with their jobs and leave companies (Crawford, 2002). The retention and performance of employees are an ongoing consideration for individual and organizational success. More specifically, employees that meet their career expectations are more satisfied and committed (Goulet & Singh, 2002) and increase job performance. Additionally, increased individual job performance helps organizations sustain a competitive advantage and continued career development, including a career path, is paramount to job satisfaction and retention (Parker & Skitmore, 2005). In this study, satisfaction, commitment, retention, and productivity of individuals are predicated on understanding and considering the feelings, attitudes, and behaviors of project managers.

Project managers, who work in moderately defined careers, often do not have clearly defined career paths and may perceive career advancement opportunities as non-salient (Ganesan & Weitz, 1996). On the other hand, well defined careers often have well defined career paths outlining career advancement and career development opportunities including licensing, certification, formal internships, uniform training content, and continuing education (Strategic Skill Initiative, 2005). The lack of a perceived career path or advancement opportunities, for moderately defined career professionals, often leads to low job satisfaction and turnover (Crawford, 2002). According to Parker and Skitmore (2005), continued career development is paramount to job satisfaction and reduced job turnover regardless of experience levels. To that end, the extent to which individuals perceive that they have a direction and purpose (defined as career path), and the influence perceived career path has on their career related affect and performance, are important considerations.

Study Purpose, Research Question, and Significance

As organizational needs expand and competition for talented workers increases, the retention of dissatisfied employees has emerged as a significant organizational challenge (Joch, 2001; Judy, D'Amico, & Geipel, 1997). Maintaining a realistic and visible organizational career path for employees in moderately defined careers may be a critical aspect of retention, job satisfaction, career commitment, and performance. To that end, it is important to consider how the variations in perceptions regarding career related organizational signals influence career related affect and behaviors.

The purpose of this study is to evaluate a proposed career pathreactionperformance model utilizing path analysis of relationships among perceived career path, autonomy/prestige, training and learning, job satisfaction, career commitment, and performance for moderately defined jobs. Underlying the proposed model is the determination regarding how employees react to perceived signals from their organization regarding their career future with their current company and the impact of these perceived signals on their affect, career outlook, and performance. The research question—What is the relationship among perceived career path, autonomy/prestige, training and learning, job satisfaction, career commitment, and performance?—is explored using individuals employed as project managers, a moderately defined career role.

This study contributed to a better understanding of careers and career development activities by identifying

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relationships that provide a framework for individuals to align individual career goals with organizational goals in an effort to continuously evaluate career success within organizational environments. Likewise, this study supported organizations by suggesting that the perceived signals to employees regarding their futures in moderately defined careers impacts employee attitudes, career plans and performance.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework includes examination of career mobility, signaling theory, career motivation, and expectancy theory. The theories are discussed herein and used to examine, understand, and frame the experiences, attitudes, and behaviors of individuals in moderately defined careers.

Career Mobility

Career mobility suggests that career paths may include intrafirm and interfirm mobility. According to Sicherman and Galor (1990), “Intrafirm career mobility (‘promotion’) is subject to the employer’s decision, where interfirm mobility and its optimal timing are determined by the individuals who choose the optimal quitting time so as to maximize their expected lifetime earnings” (p. 171). Additionally, interfirm mobility is not predictable and is based on schooling, ability, and job experience. The theory suggests that the optimal investment in human capital and the optimal exit time maximizes the anticipated income.

Sicherman and Galor (1990) frame career mobility within the context of education and training and the impacts on firm mobility. They contend that “given an occupation of origin, more educated individuals are more likely to move to a higher-level occupation” (p. 178). In the present study, career mobility theory can be used to frame employees’ perceptions and behaviors related to perceived career path, career commitment, and participation in training and learning.

Signaling Theory

Signaling theory is predicated on the idea that employers read potential signals, such as education and certifications, along with the relationship of those signals with productivity as a basis to respond to competitive industry pressures and reward the individuals that initiate the signal (Spence, 1976). More specifically, according to Spence (1976), “employers read education as a signal of productivity, but the content of the signal is determined by the pattern of the investment by individuals, and that in turn is determined in part by the way it is rewarded in the market” (p. 51). Similarly, employees respond to employer signals in the same manner. Individuals respond to perceived signals by modifying affective responses, outlook, and behaviors. In this study, employee perceptions of their organizational career path are framed as a proxy for signals from their employer regarding their career path. Additionally, signaling theory supports the examination of training and learning and certifications as behaviors that will lead to job satisfaction and career commitment that impact performance.

Career Motivation Theory

London (1983) and London and Mone (1987) introduced an integrative model of career motivation including career decisions and career behaviors. The underlying premise of the model is based on prospective rationality and suggests that career decisions and behaviors are predictors of outcomes and expectations. Vroom’s (1964) expectancy theory also supports the prospective rationality principle. The career motivation model (London, 1983) proposes that career motivation is a multidimensional construct that includes individual and situational characteristics.

Individual characteristics include needs, interests, and personality variables and are represented by three domains including career identity, career insight, and career resilience. Career identity includes the extent to which people define and perceive themselves in terms of their profession (London, 1983). Career insight includes “the extent to which the person has realistic perceptions of him or herself and the organization and relates these perceptions to career goals (London, 1983, p. 621). Career resilience includes the motivation not to be disrupted in less than optimal work environments. The disruption can be in the form of career goal barriers, poor peer and management relations, and career path uncertainty. The situation component of the career motivation model includes aspects of the person’s work environment. The aspects of the work environment consist of career planning, career development programs, job design, leadership style, and staffing plans and policies.

In this study, career motivation theory supports the idea that individual and environmental factors influence the career development activities of moderately defined careers. The theory includes an examination of the professionals’ perceptions about the environment including autonomy/prestige, career paths, and training and learning activities. Additionally, performance outcomes and career expectations are examined by focusing on job satisfaction, career commitment, and performance variables.

Expectancy Theory

Expectancy theory has been studied within the framework of work and motivation in organizations and is based on predicting professionals' preferences and choices (Mitchell & Beach, 1976). Expectancy is subjectively perceived probability and expectancy "is defined as a monetary belief concerning the likelihood that a particular act will be followed by a particular outcome" (Vroom, 1964, p. 17). According to Vroom (1964), "Whenever an individual chooses between alternatives which involve uncertain outcomes, it seems clear that his behavior is affected not only by his preferences among these outcomes but also by the degree to which he believes these outcomes to be probable" (Vroom, 1964, p. 17).

Vroom (1964) reported that the five properties of work roles that are related to the motivational aspects of why people work include: to provide financial resources, to release energy, to produce goods and services, to stimulate social interaction, and to obtain social status or prestige. Vroom (1964) also posited that (a) "people prefer tasks and jobs which they believe to require the use of their abilities"; (b) "people prefer consistent information about their abilities to inconsistent information"; and (c) "people prefer receiving information to the effect that they possess valued abilities to information that they do not possess valued abilities" (p. 286). The concept of expectancy suggests "the specific outcomes attained by a person are depended not only on the choices that he makes but also on events which are beyond his control" (Vroom, 1964, p. 251). The examination of training and learning, career path, autonomy/prestige, job satisfaction, career commitment, and performance can be framed within the context of this theory.

Although space limitations for this submission prohibited an elaboration regarding related literature beyond theoretical framing, the systematic review of literature associated with this study supported both the need for the specific research question presented herein and an absence of previous studies examining related research questions. Career mobility theory and signaling theory are used to discuss career path and training and learning variables, career identity is used to discuss job satisfaction, career commitment, and autonomy/prestige relationships, and expectancy theory is used to discuss performance. Career mobility (Sicherman & Galor, 1990) theory is based on the premise that optimal investment in human capital and the optimal exit time maximizes the anticipated income. Signaling theory posits education, training and learning, and certifications act as signals to organizations to offer competitive salaries to employees. Career motivation (London, 1983, London & Malone, 1987) suggests that career decisions and behaviors are predictors of outcomes and expectations. Expectancy theory posits that the strength of actions is based on the strength of outcome expectancy and on the value or attractiveness of the outcome (Vroom, 1964). Prior research results associated with findings from this study are discussed in the results section below.

A Path Reaction Performance Model for Moderately Defined Careers

The theoretical model developed prior to study implementation proposed a positive relationship between project managers perceived career path, engagement in training, job satisfaction and learning and performance on the job. Career mobility, signaling theory, career motivation, and expectancy theory provide insight into individual and organizational interactions associated with individual and corporate decision making. Career path and training and learning variables in this study are associated with career mobility theory and signaling theory as are job satisfaction, career commitment, and autonomy/prestige relationships. The performance variable is used in relation to expectancy theory. Figure 1 below projected project manager reactions regarding perceived career path and performance, including affective responses which were proposed to mediate the relationship.

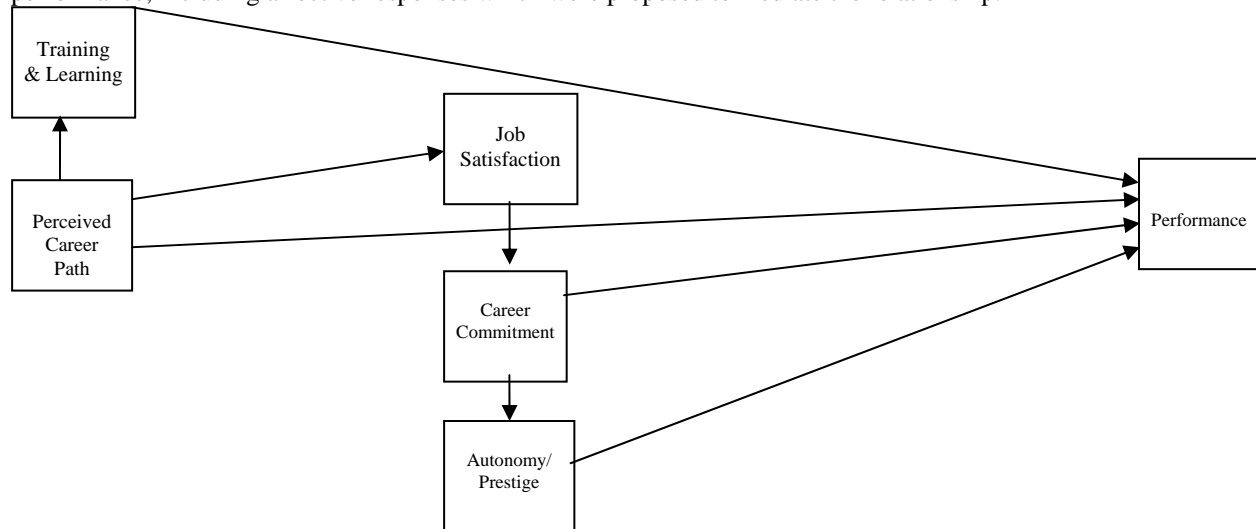


Figure 1. A path reaction performance model for moderately defined careers.

Notice: The researcher hypothesized there was a positive relationship between the variables for the indicated path.

Method

The following section outlines the process undertaken to test the theoretical model presented above and include sample and procedure presented herein.

Sample and Procedures

Data were collected from members and affiliates of project management related chapters and project managers who worked in organizations including an energy enterprise, research and teaching institute, and a training and technical agency. E-mails seeking participation in the research study were sent to ten regional professional associations emphasizing project management and three organizations employing project managers (located in the southwestern US). An information sheet including the online survey link was sent to the project management chapter and organizations for distribution to their subscribed mailing lists of project managers in November and December 2006. The online survey included questions that measured the following variables: demographics, autonomy, prestige, career path, training and learning, job satisfaction, career commitment, and performance. The instrument reliability was .711 and considered reliable because higher than .70 (Cortina 1993). Respondents selected responses to demographic information including: gender; age; title/position; education level; PMI member status; PM certification status; number of years worked in project management; and industry.

The population of the organizations that participated in the study included (a) 33 project managers from a global energy enterprise, (b) 39 project managers from a public metropolitan research and teaching institute, and (c) 12 project managers from a training and technical agency. The sample for the current study was 644 and no significant differences were identified between the large undefined population and the known organization respondents. The response rate for organizations was 77%. AMOS software system was used to effectuate the path analysis to examine the path of relationships among the model variables including: autonomy/prestige, career path, training and learning, job satisfaction, career commitment, and performance for project managers. The dependent variable (DV) in the study was performance and the independent variables (IVs) included autonomy/prestige, career path, training and learning, job satisfaction, career commitment.

Results

In Table 1, the estimate column represents the unstandardized regression coefficient. The p value indicates the significance of the path and the paths that are significant at the $p < .001$ and $p < .05$ are discussed herein in the discussion section.

Table 1. *Model Regression Weights*

| <i>Paths</i> | | <i>Estimate</i> | <i>S.E.</i> | <i>C.R.</i> | <i>p</i> |
|---------------------|------------------------------|-----------------|-------------|-------------|----------|
| Job Satisfaction | <i>f</i> Career Path | .402 | .029 | 13.869 | *** |
| Career Commitment | <i>f</i> Job Satisfaction | .780 | .042 | 18.730 | *** |
| Training & Learning | <i>f</i> - Career Path | .047 | .015 | 3.072 | .002* |
| Autonomy/Prestige | <i>f</i> Career Commitment | -.100 | .016 | -6.070 | *** |
| Performance | <i>f</i> Training & Learning | -.178 | .074 | -2.397 | .017* |
| Performance | <i>f</i> Autonomy/Prestige | .241 | .063 | 3.818 | *** |
| Performance | <i>f</i> Career Commitment | -.071 | .028 | -2.511 | .012* |
| Performance | <i>f</i> Career Path | .111 | .030 | 3.657 | *** |

*** = path is significant at the $p < .01$ level; * = path is significant at the $p < .05$ level. The standardized regression weights by path are represented in Figure 2.

Discussion

A discussion of the results of the study is presented herein and includes a discussion of the significant direct and indirect paths.

Direct Path

The model included four direct significant paths for the independent variables to the dependent variable including (a) training and learning is negatively related to performance; (b) career path is positively related to performance; (c) autonomy/prestige is positively related with performance, and (d) career commitment is negatively related to performance Each path is discussed herein in addition to the implications for organizations and individuals for the indicated path.

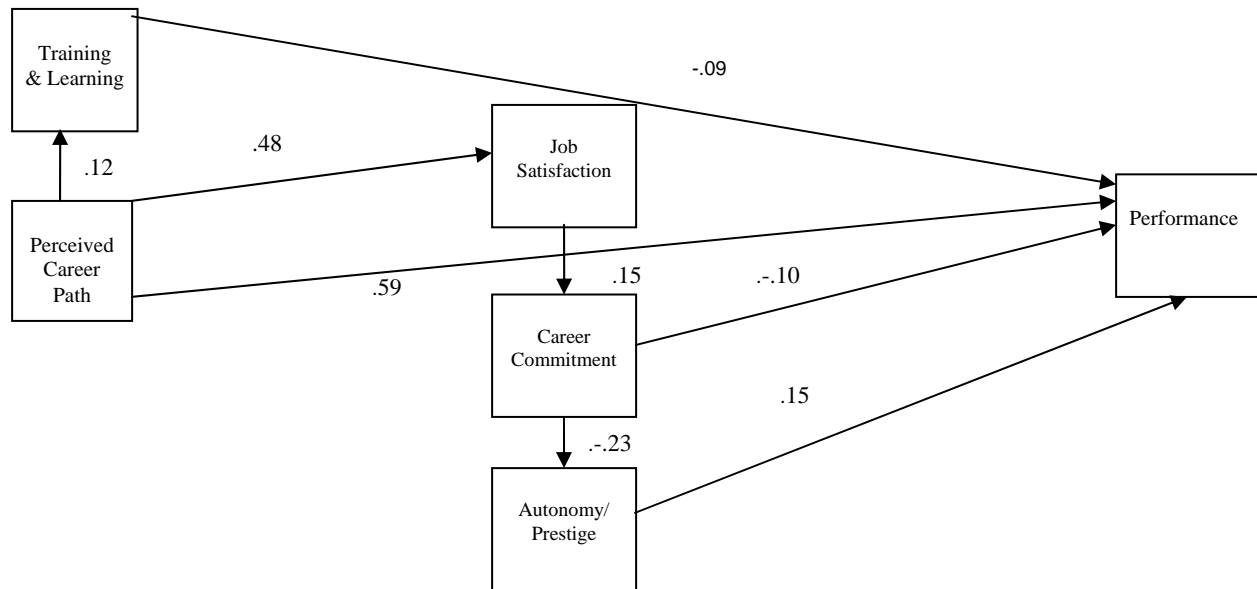


Figure 2. Career development model with standardized regression weights rounded from table 1.

Career path performance. The path between career path and performance was positive and significant (beta=.111, p<.001). As project managers perceive that there is a career path their performance will increase. The discussion associated with this path is consistent with the expectancy theory (Vroom, 1964), career mobility theory (Sicherman & Galor, 1990), and motivation theory (London, 1983; London & Mone, 1987) in that project managers are motivated to participate in career path activities expecting that participation in career path activities will lead to expected outcomes including career goal (Adamson, 1997; Callahan, 2003) attainment and increased job performance.

Autonomy/prestige performance. The path between prestige and performance was positive and significant. This path suggests that project managers anticipate that the more autonomous and prestigious their job is the better they will perform in their job. The discussion associated with this path is consistent with the career motivation theory that suggests that career identity is framed within the context of the work environment and the motivation for advancement along a career path is perceived to be associated with performance (London, 1983; London & Mone, 1987). In this study, most of the participants in the larger study reported that in general the project management profession allows for autonomy/prestige and that autonomy and prestige increase performance. Additionally, the discussion for this path is supported by the expectancy theory (Vroom, 1964) in that individuals choose careers with job dimensions in which they identify with and as such are motivated (London, 1983) to achieve personal and work outcomes including increased job performance (Hackman & Oldman, 1976).

Career commitment performance. The path between career commitment and performance was negative and significant. The longer project managers work in their careers the less they are committed to their careers. The discussion for this path is consistent with the career maturation theory that career maturity predicts longer continuity in the career but not greater success including performance (Savickas, Briddick, & Watkins, 2002). Additionally, the project manager may no longer be motivated to increase performance as professionals may be committed to working in careers in which there are other intrinsic and extrinsic rewards not including performance (Smits, McLean, Tanner, 1993).

Indirect Paths

The model indicated that (a) autonomy/prestige was mediated by career commitment to performance; (b) career path was mediated by training and learning to performance; and (c) career path was mediated by job satisfaction and career commitment to performance, and (d) career path is mediated by job satisfaction, career commitment, and autonomy/prestige to performance.

Autonomy/prestige career commitment performance. Prestige was mediated by career commitment ($\beta = -.100$, $p < .001$) to performance ($\beta = -.071$, $p < .05$). As project managers become more committed to their careers they perceive their careers as less autonomous and prestigious as they continue to increase their performance. Research supports the idea that affective commitment is a predictor of autonomy/prestige (Carmeli, & Freund, 2002). Additionally, commitment and motivation to perform may be related to a variety of needs, including intrinsic and extrinsic rewards, in order to motivate increased job performance (Porter & Lawler, 1968). The more individual needs can be tied to effective performance, the higher will be the motivation to perform effectively.

Career path training and learning performance. In this study, career path is mediated by training and learning ($\beta = .047$, $p < .05$) to performance ($\beta = -.178$, $p < .05$). The discussion of this path suggests that as project managers perceive that there is a career path tied to training and learning they will participate more in training and learning but may not transfer the training and learning to performance. This path is supported by research that suggests that the design of career paths including career development and advancement (Hoske, 1998) need to signal (Spence, 1973) training and learning and certifications as career advancement components that support job performance.

Career path job satisfaction and career commitment performance. In this study, career path is mediated by job satisfaction ($\beta = .402$, $p < .001$) and career commitment ($\beta = .780$, $p < .001$) to performance ($\beta = -.071$, $p < .05$). As project managers perceive that there is a career path they will be more satisfied (Aryee & Tan, 1992) and committed in their careers and as such may reduce their performance. This path is supported by research that suggests when project managers meet their career expectations through career path attainment they will be more satisfied and more committed to their careers (Goulet & Singh, 2002). To that end, job dissatisfaction and lack of career commitment may lead to a decrease in job performance because the motivation to increase performance is no longer salient (Porter & Lawler, 1968) due to goal attainment.

Career path job satisfaction, career commitment, and autonomy/prestige performance. In this study, career path is mediated by job satisfaction ($\beta = .402$, $p < .001$), career commitment ($\beta = .780$, $p < .001$), and autonomy/prestige ($\beta = -.100$, $p < .001$) to performance ($\beta = .241$, $p < .001$). This path suggests that when project managers perceive that there is a career path they will be more satisfied (Aryee & Tan, 1992) and committed in their careers. However, as professionals become more committed they view their jobs as less autonomous and prestigious and increase their job performance. Research supports the idea that career commitment is not related to work quality (Aryee & Tan, 1992).

Study Limitations

The study includes study limitations related to issues of generalizability and training and learning and performance measures. The sample was restricted in that it included a nonprobability sample of 644 project managers from professional associations and project managers that worked in selected organizations. The generalizability of the sample participants is a limitation in the study in that (a) the responses included only one moderately defined career profession, and (b) the mortality of the sample participants may have impacted study participation. The measurements for training and learning and performance were also limitations in the study. Training and learning was measured by one item and included information related to the number of training and learning hours participated in one year and framed within this study as perceived organizational support for training and learning. Additional items may need to have been added to the survey in order to measure the perception of project managers as it relates to the perception of training and learning activities. Additionally, performance was measured as a self-report item variable by respondents and may not reflect actual job performance.

Overall Implications and New Knowledge

Organizations may need to consider the context of the current work environment and the impact on careers and career development planning and execution. The current career work environment is relational, emerging, non-linear, boundary-less (Baruch, 2004), and uses signals and motivators to meet organizational needs including performance. Additionally, flat organizational structures have reduced vertical promotion paths of professionals and as such there is a need to provide more career development and career path opportunities (Dainty, Raiden, & Neale, 2004) in an effort to retain project managers and promote productivity for organizational success.

The implications to project managers suggest that individuals (a) need to become more responsible in leading their careers, and (b) need to take responsibility for aligning competencies with actions in an effort to build long-term career effects (Lichtenstein & Mendenhall, 2002). Careers are no longer seen as unidirectional with clearly defined paths that include a series of career advancements opportunities including salary increases, prestige, socioeconomic status, and security (Hall, 1996). Careers are currently seen as relational and include work challenges, relationships, and experiences with a focus on learning more from behaviors and attitudes in an effort to work in an environment that promotes individual success. Individual success may include prestige/autonomy, socioeconomic status, salaries, and career mobility and is based on individual perceptions of internal and external environments.

The study provides new knowledge for the retention and productivity of individuals that is predicated on understanding and considering the feelings, attitudes, and behaviors of project managers. Concerned organizations have an opportunity to act in partnership with their employees, creating an environment which will maximize employees' contributions, satisfy and retain the employees, and simultaneously prepare employees for future challenges. The model in this study contributed to a better understanding of careers and career development activities by identifying relationships that provide a framework for individuals to align individual career goals with organizational goals in an effort to continuously evaluate career success within organizational environments. Likewise, this study supports organizations by providing signals for developing and planning careers and career development activities that retain and produce professionals that facilitate succession planning, advancement, and retention within the organization in order to achieve competitive advantages through human resource investment (Barney, 1991).

Conclusions and Recommendations for Future Studies

Based on path analytic analysis, all of the original variables in the hypothesized career development model were retained in the revised model. The direct path relationships included (a) training and learning was negatively related to performance, (b) career path was positively related to performance, and (c) prestige was positively related to performance, and (d) career commitment was negatively related to performance. The indirect path relationships included (a) autonomy/prestige was mediated by career commitment and performance; (b) career path was mediated by training and learning to performance (c) career path was mediated by job satisfaction and career commitment to performance, and (d) career path was mediated by job satisfaction, career commitment, and autonomy/prestige to performance.

Study findings suggest organizations need to find avenues in which to bring individuals together to plan, design, and communicate career paths that send and receive signals related to career mobility, job satisfaction, and career commitment in an effort to support and motivate expected outcomes including increased job performance. Additionally, organizations need to (a) advocate ongoing performance feedback programs; (b) align rewards with performance; and (c) encourage individuals to take ownership of their careers (Werner & DeSimone, 2006).

Moderately defined career professionals that jointly work with organizations to plan, design, and communicate career paths will be more likely to take ownership of the process, effectively work to execute the career plans (El-Sabaa, 2001), retain employment in the organization, and increase performance. The key tasks for moderately defined career professionals that work in temporary, complex environments are finding a good match between job opportunities and job requirements as well as defining career success including career advancement opportunities, autonomy/prestige, increased performance, and opportunities to participate in training and learning.

Future research includes examining additional variables that may help to explain the career development model. Some additional variables for future research include personality characteristics, work environment, outside work environment, and additional demographic variables including job title and industry. Future research may also include a replication of the current study to examine another option for measuring performance including supervisor ratings and employee documents.

Include implications for HRD here and put 1 sentence regarding HRD in the intro.

Based on your experience with the literature, be sure to also tell the reader the uniqueness and significance of the study and its unique contribution to HRD relate literature.

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