Improving employee outcomes in the public sector

The beneficial effects of social support at work and job control

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Acknowledgements

This research was part-funded by an Australian Research Council (ARC) grant.

Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to examine the efficacy of the demand-control-support model, augmented with employee perceptions of organisational justice and degree of met expectations.

Design/methodology/approach – Data were collected from 128 public sector employees working in a large state police force operating under many of the elements of new public management. Hierarchical multiple regression analyses were conducted using four indicators of occupational strain: employee wellbeing, job satisfaction, organisational commitment and intent to quit.

Findings – The results of this study suggest that the demand-control-support model has great utility in identifying those aspects of the work environment associated with employee strain. Job control and social support at work in particular were the most consistent predictors. In contrast, the expectation and justice variables failed to make significant contributions to the model in all but one analysis providing no support for the “injustice as stressor” perspective.

Research limitations/implications – Although a cross-sectional design was utilized, these results highlight the value of applying the parsimonious demand-control-support model to a wider set of outcomes, especially in a public sector environment.

Practical implications – The results emphasize the importance of the relatively neglected “softer” work characteristics support and control. In order to combat the ill-effects of organisational reforms and prompt a shift towards the public value approach, managers operating under elements of new public management should ensure that adequate social support at work is available and that employee control is commensurate with their demands.

Originality/value – This study examined an augmented demand-control-support model and identified that whilst perceptions of justice can influence employee attitudes and wellbeing, the demand, control, and support variables remain the most influential factors with regard to public sector employee attitudes and wellbeing.
The NPM framework has dominated the literature over the past two decades and emphasises efficiency, effectiveness and quality (Hood, 1991; Osborne and Gaebler, 1992; Pollitt and Bouckaert, 2004). The aim of NPM was largely to create a results-oriented culture among public sector agencies and to eliminate the bureaucratic inefficiencies associated with traditional public administration, although the extent to which NPM reforms were adopted has varied (Pollitt and Bouckaert, 2004). The Australian public sector has embraced many aspects of NPM and was generally seen as an early adopter of NPM (Dixon et al., 1996). However there is considerable evidence to suggest that NPM reforms have not achieved their desired effect with some authors concluding that NPM has ultimately failed (e.g. Dunleavy et al., 2006; Kane and Patapan, 2006).

In relation to public sector personnel, for example, there are strong indications that NPM reforms have been a key source of strain among employees. The many structural, procedural and cultural changes have impacted upon civil servants through a variety of means, including increased levels of employee stress (Korunga et al., 2003), dissatisfaction (Mikkelsen et al., 2000a) and declining levels of organisational commitment (Young et al., 1998). Longer term, these adverse outcomes can result in substantial costs for the organization and ultimately affect the overall efficiency and effectiveness of the agency (McHugh and Brennan, 1994), thereby potentially preventing agencies from achieving the very benefits they set out to obtain. The shortcomings associated with NPM have led some authors to suggest a paradigm shift from the NPM position to a “public value” approach (e.g. Davis and West, 2009; O’Flynn, 2007; Talbot, 2008; Moore, 1995). In particular, Kelly et al. (2002) identified that public value could provide a broader and clearer agenda for reform within the public sector than that of the NPM framework.

The current investigation seeks to examine the working conditions experienced by employees in an Australian-based public sector agency that had implemented a series of NPM-oriented reforms over the previous eight years. In particular, we aim to identify work characteristics that are closely associated with four important employee-level outcomes (psychological health, job satisfaction, organisational commitment and intention to quit) and highlight conditions that management could focus on in order to build healthier and more effective public sector organizations.

The outcomes of this research will be particularly relevant to public sector organisations still operating under the more economically-focused NPM paradigm, however we expect that the findings will also be useful for those agencies moving towards the public value management approach (Talbot, 2008). In the case of the latter, low levels of morale, dissatisfaction, withdrawal cognitions (e.g. intention to quit) and other indicators of employee strain represent major barriers to improved operational capacity and limit the extent to which agencies can enhance their “public value scorecard” (Moore, 2003). Identifying and monitoring the key sources of strain experienced by public sector personnel is therefore an important avenue for developing well-informed capacity building strategies that can boost the effectiveness of state-funded agencies.

1. The demand-control-support model

Commonly, work stress models are applied in organisational settings to provide some insight into critical aspects of the work environment. This study will employ one of the most widely used models underpinning occupational research on employee outcomes (Fox et al.,
1993) – the demand-control-support (DCS) model. Originally the DCS consisted of two elements, job demands and decision latitude/control, which interacted to influence workers’ experiences of stress and ill health (Karasek et al., 1981). The demand-control model was later expanded to include social support and the extent to which it is available to the individual, as shown in Figure 1 (Johnson and Hall, 1988). This expanded model posits that levels of stress are directly related to the relationship between demands placed on the employee and the resources (i.e. control and support) available to them. Accordingly, “high strain” positions are characterised by high workloads in combination with low decision latitude and/or isolation from the support of supervisors, colleagues, family and friends. Organisational and external sources of support are important in managing employee health in the public sector (Dunseath et al., 1995) and social support has previously been found to moderate the levels of strain felt by employees (Van Der Doef et al., 2000), and in particular public sector employees (Sargent and Terry, 2000; Terry et al., 1993).

2. Organisational justice

The psychological contract refers to a set of unwritten agreements about what one party expects to give and receive from the other (Robinson, 1996; Robinson and Morrison, 2000) and can cover a range of issues and expectations, including training and development, promotional opportunities and career paths (Turnley and Feldman, 2000). Breaches in psychological contract are associated with a range of negative outcomes, including reduced employee trust, higher levels of job dissatisfaction, reduced commitment to the organization and employee turnover (Robinson and Morrison, 2000). Perceptions of justice are central to the assessment of contract breaches and they heavily influence the severity of the outcomes (Morrison and Robinson, 1997; Rousseau, 1995). In situations where an individual perceives procedures to be unfair and is the victim of a breach of their psychological contract, high levels of frustration and dissatisfaction result (Rousseau, 1995).

The “injustice as stressor” perspective is quite new and has extended the testing of the beneficial effects of justice to the field of stress (for a review, see Cohen-Charash and Spector, 2001). Colquitt (2001) identifies four forms of organisational justice that can influence employee attitudes and behaviour at work. Procedural justice refers to the justice of processes that lead to decision outcomes, distributive justice is the extent to which outcomes are consistent with implicit norms for allocation, interpersonal justice refers to the extent to which decision makers treat people with respect and dignity, and informational justice reflects the extent to which decision makers thoroughly explain the rationale for decisions. Preliminary research suggests that employee perceptions of injustice at work can have far-reaching effects on employee health and satisfaction. Studies of city residents have linked distributive, procedural, and interactional justice types to depression and emotional exhaustion (Tepper, 2000). Procedural justice and a hybrid form of justice (alternatively termed relational justice) have been linked to occupational strain symptoms such as depression and difficulties concentrating (Elovainio et al., 2001). Additionally, distributive and procedural justice have previously been linked with self-reported sickness and increased absence from work (Elovainio et al., 2002; De Boer et al., 2002). Similar studies investigating employee perceptions of justice indicated that the extent to which employees felt their efforts had been justly rewarded significantly influenced manager satisfaction (Janssen, 2001), counterproductive behaviour at work (Fox et al., 2001) and acted to influence the relationship between job demands and innovative work behaviours (Janssen, 2000).
A potential mechanism for the impact of justice on stress is through the view of injustice as a stressor – a characteristic of work that causes employees to doubt their abilities to cope with demands (Judge and Colquitt, 2004). Given the large amount of change that has occurred within the Australian public sector over the past decade, it would be reasonable to expect that employee expectations and perceptions of organisational justice may have been impacted by changes to organisational processes and policies. Consequently, this study also investigates the potential for justice to be an antecedent to key outcomes in organisational behaviour, as called-for in the literature (Greenberg, 1990).

3. Employee outcomes: attitudes and wellbeing

Studies have found that psychological health, job satisfaction and organisational commitment are important employee-centered variables (Yousef, 2000), particularly in the public sector (Mikkelsen et al., 2000b). Psychological health is a context-free measure of employee wellbeing (Warr, 1996) and is often used in job stress research (Grebner et al., 2003; Munro et al., 1998). Similarly, job satisfaction as a form of context-specific wellbeing is one of the most commonly researched aspects of job-related wellbeing (Warr, 1996). Both psychological health and job satisfaction have been frequently associated with DCS-related work conditions including job demands (e.g. De Lange et al., 2004), job discretion (e.g. Mikkelsen et al., 2005), and social support (e.g. Sargent and Terry, 2000).

These forms of wellbeing are two of the most common foci of research in this field. However, in terms of assessing the impact of NPM on employees, a broader set of employee outcomes may be warranted. For example, employee turnover can represent a large cost to the organization, representing 90-200 per cent of the average annual salary of the positions affected (Cascio, 2000). Quit intentions and organisational commitment are typically the best predictors of employee turnover (for a review, see Rodger et al., 2000). In terms of managerial utility, once the employee has left it is too late for the manager to do something about it. Consequently, this study includes employee outcomes that can give more warning regarding turnover, namely, organisational commitment and employee intention to quit.

Organisational commitment in particular has a strong link with turnover (Mathieu and Zajac, 1990). Further, various forms of psychological withdrawal (such as declining job commitment and employee disengagement) have been strongly associated with the working conditions measured in the present study, particularly job demands, job control, and social support (Grebner et al., 2003; Meyer et al., 2002; Taris et al., 2001).

Overall, job satisfaction, organisational commitment and work stress have consistently been found to be related (e.g. Thoreson et al., 2003). However, they do have key differences, with commitment often seen as a more stable and long-term attitude than job satisfaction, although both impact on performance (Testa, 2001; Tett and Meyer, 1993), and both job satisfaction and psychological health (strain) are seen as indicators of wellbeing. Together, job satisfaction, strain and commitment provide a comprehensive set of outcomes that can be used to assess the various impacts of the components of the DCS model and the justice variables, as discussed earlier.

4. Aims of the study
The aim of this study was to investigate the efficacy of the DCS variables, in combination with employee perceptions of fairness, to predict the employee outcomes of psychological health, job satisfaction, organisational commitment and intent to quit. Additionally, we aimed to examine the impact of both work and non-work support on the outcomes variables. By assessing the predictive capacity of these variables in an organization that has adopted substantial NPM initiatives, this study seeks to highlight the issues that management should focus on in order to combat the ill-effects of organisational reforms and build healthier and more effective public sector organizations.

5. Method

5.1 Sample

The sample selected to test the study model was a non-operational department within a large Australian state police service (hereafter referred to as Department A). The vast majority of employees within this department worked as public servants and performed a range of support roles including general administrative duties, database management and reporting as well as conducting background research work. Similar to many Australian-based public sector agencies, Department A had undertaken extensive NPM-related changes over the previous eight years, including a significant shift in the department’s overall mission statement, several unit-level amalgamations and extensive modifications to a range of systems and procedures (Hughes, 2006; O’Flynn, 2007). One particular system that had been introduced was a new performance management system. This system provided detailed performance measures that enabled senior personnel the opportunity to track unit performance whilst also achieving higher levels of accountability and control.

All members of Department A were invited to take part in this study via a letter from the Chief Commissioner. This letter explained the reasons why the research was being undertaken and was sent to staff along with the questionnaire, using an internal mail service. Once staff had completed their questionnaire, they were asked to seal the questionnaire in a reply-paid envelope and mail it to the authors. Overall, 152 completed questionnaires were returned to the authors, representing a response rate of 48 per cent.

To summarise the demographic characteristics of the sample, most (56 per cent) of the respondents were female, the majority of respondents were aged 30 years and over, and the largest number of respondents were 30 to 39 years of age (34 per cent). In terms of tenure, the majority of respondents reported that they had been with the organisation as a whole for nine years or less (47 per cent). Three-quarters of the respondents reported that they had attained a tertiary qualification (70 per cent), whilst secondary school was the highest level of education for 16 per cent and only 11 per cent reported that they had obtained a certificate (trade/non-trade). After excluding surveys with missing values and outliers, the regression analyses below are conducted on 128 cases.

5.2 Measures

Job demands were assessed using the Quantitative Workload scale (Caplan et al., 1980). This is an 11-item scale that encompassed both psychological and physical job demands. Participants were asked to respond on a five-point scale ranging from rarely to very often. High scores on the scale indicate high job demands.
Participant perceptions of the amount of control they experienced at work were measured using the nine-item decision latitude scale developed by Karasek (1985). Participants were asked to respond on a five-point scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree. The items were added such that the higher the score, the higher the level of control.

Work and non-work support were assessed using the 17-item scale developed by Etzion (1984). Nine of the items assessed the level of support received from work sources (i.e. supervisors, co-workers and subordinates) and the remaining eight items measured the support from non-work sources (i.e. family and friends). Participants recorded their responses on a seven-point scale ranging from very little to very much, with high scores in the scale indicating that the sources supported them to a greater extent.

The expectations measure was defined as general beliefs held by employees about what they will find in their job and the organisation and was measured using five items from Robinson and Morrison’s (2000) “Perceived contract breach” measure. These items were rated on a five-point scale, from disagree strongly to agree strongly, according to the extent to which respondents agreed that their expectations had been met. After reverse-coding the two negatively orientated items, the item scores were summed to constitute an overall expectations score, with higher scores corresponding to expectations being met to a higher degree.

Justice was measured using the 20-item justice measure developed by Colquitt (2001). Four specific types of justice were represented, with seven items measuring procedural justice, four measuring distributive justice, four measuring interpersonal justice and five measuring informational justice. Items were rated on a five-point scale according to the extent that various elements of justice applied to the respondent, from very often to rarely. For each of the four sub-scales, their respective items were summed to make a total score, with higher scores indicating higher levels of justice.

Psychological wellbeing was measured with the GHQ-12 developed by Goldberg and Williams (1988). This measure was designed to measure self-perceived psychological health and focuses on a break in normal functioning. Participants were asked to answer 12 items using a four-point scale ranging from not at all (scored as zero) to much more than usual (scored as three). The scoring was reverse-coded such that higher scores indicated higher levels of perceived wellbeing.

Job satisfaction was measured using a shortened version of the satisfaction scale from the Job Diagnostic Survey designed by Hackman and Oldham (1976). Respondents were required to rate three items on a seven-point scale, ranging from extremely satisfied to extremely dissatisfied. These three items were summed to constitute an overall job satisfaction score, with higher scores associated with higher levels of job satisfaction.

Organisational commitment was measured using the Affective Commitment Scale developed by Allen and Meyer (1990), which contained eight items. Respondents rated each item on a five-point scale, ranging from disagree strongly to agree strongly. After reverse-scoring negatively orientated items, the eight items were summed to form an overall affective organisational commitment score, with higher scores indicating higher levels of commitment.
Intent to quit was measured by three items adapted from Wayne et al. (1997). Intention to quit was defined as an employee actively seeking alternative employment outside the organisation, and/or seriously considering seeking alternative employment, and whether they saw themselves as being employed by the organisation in two years time. Each item was measured on a seven-point scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree, where higher scores indicated a stronger intention to quit.

6. Results

Regression analyses were used to assess which variables were significant predictors of the outcome variables (i.e. job satisfaction, wellbeing, affective commitment and intention to quit). For each of the analyses, groups of predictors that were theoretically connected to each other were progressively entered into the regression. Each of those groups represents a step in the analysis and enables the researchers to identify the unique contribution made by the variables within each step. The first step of the regression analyses contained job control, demand, support at work and support outside work. The second step contained a measure of expectations (i.e. the extent to which expectations were fulfilled), whilst the third step included the four justice subscales (procedural, distributive, interpersonal and informational justice).

The results for the multiple regression analysis predicting job satisfaction (Table I) indicate that job control and support at work were significant predictors within Department A. These results indicate that higher levels of support at work and job control are associated with higher levels of job satisfaction. The predictors in the first step (job control, demand, support at work and support outside work) accounted for 31 per cent of the variance in job satisfaction, the addition of expectations in the second step and the four justice subscales in the third step did not account for any additional variance.

The results for the multiple regression analysis using wellbeing as the outcome variable are presented in Table II. The results of this analysis indicate that the only significant predictor of wellbeing for Department A employees was support at work, where higher levels of support at work were associated with higher levels of wellbeing. Although the first four variables – job control, demand, support at work and support outside work – made a significant contribution to the model, accounting for 27 per cent of the variance in wellbeing, neither the second nor third step made significant contributions.

The multiple regression using affective commitment as the outcome variable (presented in Table III) indicates that job control, support at work and distributive justice all made significant contributions to employee affective commitment. The strongest predictor was support at work. Overall, the model explained 30 per cent of the variance in the affective commitment of Department A employees, although the majority of this variance (25 of 30 per cent) was explained by the variables in the first step of the model. The measure of expectations did not make a significant contribution to the model, whilst the third step including the four justice subscales explained an additional 5 per cent.

The regression analyses presented in Table IV revealed that job control was the only significant predictor of intention to quit. This result indicates that lower job control was associated with higher intentions to quit amongst Department A employees. Overall the model presented above explained 25 per cent of the variance in intention to quit.
step in the model, comprising the DCS measures, explained 22 per cent of the variance whilst the later steps explained non-significant increments of variance.

7. Discussion

The results of these analyses suggest that the demand-control-support model has great utility in identifying those working conditions that are affecting the strain, attitudes and intention to quit of the public sector employees in Department A, with at least one element of the DCS a significant predictor of each of the four outcome variables. Support at work and job control were the most consistent predictors across outcomes. Support at work significantly predicted job satisfaction, wellbeing and commitment. Job control significantly predicted job satisfaction, commitment and intent to quit. The only other significant predictor, and the only time one of the types of justice was a significant predictor, was the significant relationship between distributive justice and commitment.

This study joins a growing list of studies that have not found a significant relationship between demand and various forms of wellbeing or other employee attitudes (for a review, see De Lange et al., 2003). The consistent lack of a finding implies that the nature of the relationship between demand and these outcome variables needs further delineation and/or that there may be method effects occurring, such as having employees within a certain organisation working to implicit cultural guidelines or explicit rules, which result in a narrow range of variance for the demand variable thereby making it harder for any potentially true relationship to emerge in intra-organisational studies. In contrast, some of the landmark studies in this area (e.g. Johnson and Hall, 1988) were more epidemiological in nature and covered a large range of occupations. Interestingly, the softer elements of the DCS – control and social support – clearly had a consistent impact. That is, this study confirms the finding of other studies (e.g. Dunseath et al., 1995) that social support from supervisors, co-workers and family and friends are important in managing employee wellbeing in the public sector.

The extent to which the employee's expectations were met by their organisation did not significantly predict any of the employee outcomes examined in this study. It is possible that this result may reflect a difference in the context examined in this study relative to the contexts that form the majority of the studies that have found an impact of the breach of expectations. For example, the department investigated in this study had all of its employees covered by state “Awards” (legislation protecting a comprehensive set of working conditions), whereas many of the studies in the USA are of employees, or often managers, who do not have such protection. This and other potential explanations for this non-result could be examined in future research.

Similarly, the results of this study provide no support for the proposition of the injustice as stressor perspective (Judge and Colquitt, 2004). That is, the potential mechanism for the impact of justice on stress through the view of injustice as a stressor – a characteristic of work that causes employees to doubt their abilities to cope with demands – was not supported, due to the lack of a significant relationship between any of the four types of justice and either context-free wellbeing or context-specific wellbeing (job satisfaction).

The present study has some limitations: specifically, the cross-sectional nature of the study design and the reliance on the subjective views of the participants. In relation to concerns
regarding common-method variance, some reassurance is provided by research that has shown a high correlation between expert ratings of job conditions and subjective assessments (Karasek et al., 1981; Spector, 1992), and the support that has been shown for the use of self-report measures of the outcome variables, especially commitment (Goffin and Gellatly, 2000).

The success of elements of the DCS model in predicting the employee outcomes highlights the value of applying this parsimonious generic stress model to a wider set of outcomes, especially in a public sector environment. Further, the results emphasise the importance of the relatively neglected “softer” work characteristics of social support at work and control. Organisations that are dealing with the changes produced by previous NPM introductions can reduce the potential negative consequences on employees by ensuring that employees have adequate levels of support from supervisors and colleagues and making sure that employees’ level of job control is commensurate with their demands.

The overall aim of this study was to identify working conditions that management could focus on in order to build healthier and more effective public sector organizations. Specifically, the research identified that decision-making control and social support may offer particularly valuable avenues for enhancing employee health, satisfaction and commitment. Given the context in which the current investigation was undertaken, the results are especially relevant to agencies operating under the NPM rubric. However these conditions may also represent important mechanisms for enhancing the service capabilities of public sector agencies and for achieving higher levels of public value. Public sector scholars argue that a cultural shift within state-funded organizations that allows employees greater autonomy, ensures they have the support required to work more innovatively, and encourages the development of strong social networks is necessary to begin the transition to a more public value management approach (Coats and Passmore, 2008). With this in mind, employee control and support may not only offer valuable means for enhancing a range of employee health and attitudinal outcomes, but they may also play important roles in facilitating the paradigmatic shift from NPM to public value.

This study also found that the inclusion of distributive justice made some contribution, but may not have been a worthwhile extension of the DCS. Future research may wish to take this study further and investigate the efficacy of the DCS in organizations with varying degrees of NPM and use the results to further prompt the shift to a public value framework.
Figure 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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Table I: Summary of hierarchical regression analysis for variables predicting job satisfaction

Notes: * $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.001$
Table II  Summary of hierarchical regression analysis for variables predicting wellbeing

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Notes: *p < 0.01

Table III  Summary of hierarchical regression analysis for variables predicting affective commitment

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<td>0.152</td>
<td>0.142</td>
<td>0.13</td>
<td>25.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: *p < 0.01

Table IV  Summary of hierarchical regression analysis for variables predicting intent to quit

References


**Further Reading**


**About the authors**

John J. Rodwell has a strong research background including having been the Associate Dean of Research at the Macquarie Graduate School of Management and currently holding a professorial position in management at Deakin. His current research focus is on employee-level issues such as work stress in large organisations, with an aim toward making healthier, more productive workplaces and preventing employee turnover. John J. Rodwell is the corresponding author and can be contacted at: john.rodwell@deakin.edu.au

Andrew J. Noblet is currently undertaking research in the areas of organisational behaviour, organisational health and occupational stress. He has provided research and consultancy services to a range of private and public-sector organisations and specialises in undertaking employee attitude surveys, stress audits and strategy development work.

Amanda F. Allisey is currently completing a PhD in Organisational Behaviour. Her thesis is focused on the influence of effort-reward imbalance at work and personality on employee wellbeing and general health.