

RESEARCH BRIEFS

WORRYING ABOUT WORK: WHAT CONTRIBUTES TO JOB INSECURITY?

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RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Benjamin Franklin noted that nothing is certain except death and taxes. While certainly humorous, the point is also that uncertainty is simply a fact of life. And with uncertainty often comes worry. When it comes to worrying, what keeps you up at night? Do you ever worry about losing your job or about the future of your employment? If so, you're not alone. Although feelings of job insecurity are especially rampant during economic downturns, such feelings remain even when business is booming.

Why is this? What feeds our sense of insecurity regarding our jobs? What makes some people worry more about losing their jobs than others? These questions were the focus of a recent study by Alaina Keim (Bellarmine University), Ronald Landis (Illinois Institute of Technology), Charles Pierce (University of Memphis), and David Earnest (Towson University). As Keim and her colleagues noted, feeling uncertain about one's job is highly stressful. Furthermore, studies show that feelings of job insecurity are related to poorer health, diminished job satisfaction and job involvement, and lower organizational commitment and overall job performance.

Extending the work of Sverke and Hellgren (2002), who classified predictors of job insecurity as either subjective or objective, Keim and her colleagues speculated that job insecurity may be linked to the expectations that people have about their employment relationships (i.e., what they, as employees, bring to the employment relationship and what their employer must provide in return). Such expectations form the basis of employees' psychological contracts. These psychological contracts have the function of reducing insecurity in employees. That is, when individuals are clear regarding expectations for their employment relationship, they are likely to feel more secure about the likelihood of their continued employment. If, however, they are unsure about some aspect of their employment relationship, they will likely feel insecure or apprehensive about the continuation of their job. Keim and her colleagues examined

several subjective and objective predictors of job insecurity.

Within the subjective predictors of job insecurity, they first examined *locus of control*, or the extent to which people believe events in their lives are within (internal locus of control) or outside of their control (external locus of control). They hypothesized that individuals who feel more in control of their circumstances will be less uneasy about potential job loss. In addition, they examined both *role ambiguity* (the extent to which individuals are clear regarding their responsibilities and expectations in their jobs) and *role conflict* (the extent to which individuals experience conflicting expectations and demands). They suggested that individuals will experience greater job insecurity as ambiguity and conflict regarding their roles and expectations increase. Lastly, they explored *organizational communication*, hypothesizing that individuals who report having poor or inadequate communication within their organizations will report more job insecurity whereas greater communication (in terms of frequency and accuracy) should be related to lower job insecurity.

Within the category of objective predictors of job insecurity, Keim and her colleagues hypothesized that job insecurity will be higher during *organizational change* (e.g., a downsizing or reorganization), which injects ambiguity and lack of control into the workplace. Moreover, older employees should report stronger feelings of job insecurity than younger individuals who may have lower expectations and therefore experience fewer breaches to their psychological contracts. Given past findings that women experience more violations to their psychological contracts than do men, *gender* may also be related to job insecurity, with women reporting more insecurity than would men.

Keim and her colleagues also predicted that education would be negatively related to job security since individuals with greater levels of education should have more job options. Finally, they predicted that job insecurity would be related to individuals' *job type* (blue-collar vs. white-collar), *job contract* (permanent vs. temporary contracts), and *employment*

status (part-time vs. full-time). Specifically, people in blue-collar jobs, with temporary contracts, and part-time employment should report greater feelings of job insecurity compared to their counterparts.

Lastly, Keim and her colleagues examined the extent to which the relationships between various predictors and job insecurity are affected by individuals' *country of origin*, *unemployment rates*, and *annual changes in unemployment rates*. National differences in labor laws, union prevalence, and social welfare regulations may play a role in the strength of an individual's psychological contract and the feelings of uncertainty that people have at any given time. Consequently, where individuals work may influence the relationships between various predictors and job insecurity. Likewise, the relationships between such predictors and job insecurity may be stronger when unemployment rates are higher and increasing.

STUDY DESIGN AND METHOD

To answer their research questions, Keim and her colleagues conducted a meta analysis of the existing literature. Following standard meta-analytic protocol, they carefully searched for research studies in which job insecurity and one of the predictors of interest were examined. They obtained 68 studies that they then coded for necessary information. In particular, for each study they recorded the sample size (so they could give greater weight to studies with larger sample sizes), the type of job insecurity scale that was used (recording whether the measure used was a global measure of insecurity or a multidimensional measure), the scale reliability (so they could correct for unreliability and account for measurement error), and the number of items in the scale (dichotomized as single-item scales or multi-item scales). Lastly, they coded which predictors were examined and the correlation coefficient between the predictor and job insecurity. In order to examine their hypotheses regarding unemployment and job insecurity, Keim and her colleagues computed unemployment rates and annual change in unemployment rates using the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development database.

KEY FINDINGS

As expected, Keim and her colleagues found that individuals with an internal locus of control, low role ambiguity, and low role conflict experienced less job insecurity. In addition, individuals who reported greater organizational communication experienced less apprehension about their employment. Regarding objective predictors, organizational change

was related to more job insecurity. As expected, blue-collar workers and temporary employees reported greater job insecurity compared to their white-collar and permanent counterparts, respectively. Lastly, age was related to job insecurity, but not in the predicted direction. Specifically, younger employees reported more job insecurity than older employees. Finally, there was no support for the idea that gender, education, or employment status (full-time vs. part-time) predicted job insecurity.

That said, country of origin did affect relationships between predictors and job insecurity. Keim and her colleagues found that job insecurity was differentially related to age, gender, nature of the formal employment contract (permanent vs. temporary), and organizational change depending on *where* the data were collected. For example, while age and job insecurity were negatively related in Spain, there was no such relationship in the United States or Canada. Similarly, job insecurity was more strongly negatively related to both education and age when unemployment was low and when unemployment rates had dropped from the previous year. Nevertheless, these results must be interpreted with caution given issues of potential non-independence of samples. In addition, in some cases there were a small number of studies upon which to draw conclusions. While there appears to be sufficient evidence to suggest certain subjective and objective characteristics are predictive of job insecurity, the jury is still out regarding the extent to which country of origin and unemployment rate affect those relationships.

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

Keim and her colleagues revealed many ways in which managers can help reduce their employees' feelings of job insecurity. First and foremost, their findings suggest that managers should engage in greater and more meaningful communication with their employees and clarify expectations of them if they wish to reduce job insecurity. By effectively communicating with employees and giving them an idea of what they can expect in terms of their jobs, managers will be better able to reduce employees' apprehension about the continuation of their employment.

Although maintaining open dialogue and sharing meaningful information in order to increase organizational communication and reduce role ambiguity and conflict are certainly within the control of management, many of the other predictors of job insecurity that Keim and her colleagues identified are not easy for managers to change. Yet simply having an understanding that these subjective and objective

characteristics of individuals are related to feelings of job insecurity can help management know how to proactively target their efforts to help employees. For example, knowing that younger employees and those in blue-collar jobs are likely to feel greater uncertainty regarding their continued employment should help managers improve their communication efforts.

Of course, the onus is not solely on management to reduce employee insecurity. Employees must make concerted efforts to proactively manage their psychological contracts by figuring out what is required of them and what the organization plans to provide. By talking with their peers and managers, employees can resolve conflicts, reduce ambiguities, and make themselves more aware of changes that may be on the horizon. In short, they can proactively reduce any unnecessary ambiguity and keep job insecurity to a minimum.

While it is probably unrealistic to think that job insecurity will be entirely eliminated, it can be

reduced. By knowing what subjective and objective characteristics of individuals are related to heightened job insecurity, managers and employees can proactively take steps to reduce uncertainty regarding continued employment. In doing so, the negative consequences associated with job insecurity (such as poorer health, negative attitudes, and lower job performance) can be mitigated.

REFERENCES

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