Predicting IT Job Satisfaction: Occupational Congruence and the Job Characteristics Model

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Abstract

The IT industry struggles to attract qualified talent despite an exceptional job outlook in terms of both availability and compensation. Similarly, post-secondary academic institutions struggle to recruit students for IT majors. One potential issue is that current career counseling methods do not adequately convey relevant job characteristic data to prospective job applicants and academic majors. We report the results of a pilot study surveying 72 IT professionals regarding their job interests and perceptions of important characteristics of their current job. We test the ability of Holland's classic job interest congruence model, an alternate congruence model based on professionals' job perceptions, and the Job Characteristics Model of Work Motivation (JCM) to determine which is more effective at predicting desired job outcomes. Results show that a sub-set of JCM constructs including task variety, task identity, and task autonomy is superior to congruence models in predicting positive job outcomes.

Keywords

Theory of Vocational Choice, Job Characteristics Model, occupational congruence, PLS, survey, occupational commitment, career planning, job related beliefs

Introduction

The outlook for college graduates in the information technology (IT) field is exceptionally positive. The United States Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) projects that demand for IT workers will increase 13.1 percent between 2014 and 2024, while average salaries will outpace other highly regarded occupational areas such as healthcare, legal, and business disciplines (BLS 2015). Despite this, interest in IT occupations among students remains weak (Ali and Shubra 2010). Researchers have identified several decision factors that hinder students from choosing the field including: general lack of interest in IT occupations (Burns et al. 2014), curricula difficulty, and social stigma (Zhang 2007). Some studies have found that students were aware of the field's high job availability and substantial compensation, yet still had little interest in pursuing occupations in the field (Burns et al. 2014; Kori et al. 2015).

Most career counselors rely on the BLS Occupational Outlook Handbook (BLS Handbook) when counseling advisees on potential career paths (BLS 2015). The BLS Handbook provides interest profiles for IT occupations that were generated based on Holland's (1959) Theory of Vocational Choice (TVC). These profiles are commonly referred to as RAISEC codes in reference to the six interest dimensions that form the basis for the codes. Counselors often couple data from the BLS Handbook with an individual interest inventory assessment such as the United States Department of Labor's (DOL) Occupational Information Network (O*NET) Interest Profiler. The premise behind TVC is that individuals will be well-suited for occupations that have high congruence between their interest profile and the occupation's RAISEC code. Consistent with the premise of TVC, a recent qualitative study found that students were admitted to IT majors at a higher rate when they perceived an IT career to be suited to their interests.
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(Kori et al. 2015). However, previous research also found near-zero correlations between student O*NET profiles and the occupational code of their intended IT occupation (Young et al. 2016), suggesting that students perceive those occupations in a manner far different than indicated by the O*NET assigned occupational codes.

While congruence between DOL-defined job characteristics and the job candidate’s interest inventory are the dominant paradigm in career counseling (Dik et al. 2010), research exploring occupational congruence and job satisfaction of working individuals has produced equivocal results. In a meta-analysis of 27 studies, Tranberg et al. (1993) found that congruence was not a significant predictor of job satisfaction among workers. This suggests that other theories may be better suited when examining satisfaction related to a given occupation. The Job Characteristics Model of Work Motivation (JCM) is one candidate model for assessing occupational satisfaction. It assesses occupational characteristics such as skill variety, task identity, task significance, autonomy and feedback in ultimately determining employee satisfaction.

This research reports the results of a pilot study that examined the interests and occupational perceptions of professional IT workers. It assesses the impact of occupational congruence on job satisfaction by specific job role. It further compares the relative importance of occupational congruence with factors from the JCM to determine which theory better predicts job satisfaction. It concludes by contrasting RAISEC codes derived from the IT professionals’ perceptions of job characteristics with O*NET RAISEC codes to determine which is a better predictor of job satisfaction.

**Literature Review**

**Theory of Vocational Choice**

The TVC is one of a group of theories referred to as trait and factor theories that focus on the characteristics of the individual in relation to occupations (Patton 2008). The theory has historically been considered a practical tool for guiding students in academic environments by identifying occupations consistent with individuals’ patterns of interest and ability (Smart et al. 2000). The TVC postulates that an individual’s vocational interest can be classified using six dimensions that include: Realistic (R), Investigative (I), Artistic (A), Social (S), Enterprising (E), and Conventional (C), resulting in the acronym RAISEC (Holland 1996). The three central components of the theory are individuals, job environments, and congruence between individuals and job environments (Smart et al. 2000). Job description data is used to assess the work environment along the six dimensions. This results in a three letter code identifying the most important characteristics of a given occupation. Individuals complete an interest inventory which determines their relative preference for work types associated with the six dimensions. The theory suggests that when there is high congruence between an occupation’s code and an individual’s code, the individual will be more successful and satisfied (Holland 1996). Traditional vocational counseling has principally relied on Holland-type interest inventories to establish individual preferences and subsequently identify congruent occupations (Dik et al. 2010).

A number of instruments have been developed based on the TVC. The Vocational Preference Inventory (VPI) was administered to 12,432 college freshman in 1964 (Holland 1966). Several additional personality assessments were developed subsequent to the VPI including the Self-Directed Search (Holland, 1994), the Strong Interest Inventory (Harmon et al. 1994), the Vocational Identity Scale (Holland et al. 1993), and, most recently, the Occupational Information Network (O*NET) Interest Profiler1. The theory has also formed the basis for extensive compilations of job characteristics data. For example, the *Dictionary of Holland Occupational Codes* (DHOC) lists TVC classifications for more than 1200 occupations. These codes were derived via an algorithm based on DOL job description data (Gottfredson and Holland 1996). The BLS incorporated TVC classifications into the O*NET occupational database, which provides code classifications for nearly 1,000 occupations (BLS 2016a).

1 Developed by the United States Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) and accessible at https://www.mynextmove.org/explore/ip
The primary strengths of TVC are its simplicity, ease of interest inventory administration, and straightforward interpretation (Edwards 1991). It has been criticized for equivocal findings on the relationship between congruence and occupational satisfaction in two different meta-analyses with Assouline and Meir (1987) reporting a mean correlation of .21 while Tranberg et al. (1993) found a mean correlation of .20. This equates to congruence being able to predict approximately four percent of the variance in occupational satisfaction. Finally, TVC has been criticized for its inability to distinguish between career satisfaction and job satisfaction (Kristof-Brown et al. 2005; Spokane et al. 2000). The six dimensions of TVC have been refined through years of empirical investigation (Holland 1959, 1966, 1996) and validated in numerous research domains (Dik et al. 2010; Tziner et al. 2014). Despite broad application, our review of the extant literature only produced a single study using TVC to analyze IT occupational decisions. Based on a study of 152 IT professionals and 415 non-IT professionals, results showed that individuals who measure high on the realistic dimension are significantly more likely to pursue an IT related occupation whereas individuals who measured high on the enterprising dimension were significantly less likely to pursue an IT related occupation.

**Job Characteristics Model of Work Motivation**

Hackman and Oldham (1975) proposed the JCM arguing that core job dimensions affect critical psychological states which, in turn, impact personal and work outcomes. Core job dimensions included skill variety, task identity, task significance, autonomy and feedback. Critical psychological states were based on meaningfulness of the work, responsibility for outcomes of work, and knowledge of work results. Personal and work outcomes assessed qualitative factors such as high internal work motivation, high quality work performance, work satisfaction, low absenteeism, and turnover. Hackman and Oldham (1976) tested their proposed theory and found support for the relationships between job dimensions and outcomes. A decade later, Fried and Ferris (1987) performed a meta-analysis on nearly 200 studies of the model with results indicating support for the multidimensionality of job dimensions, support for the mediating role of psychological states and the association of job characteristics and performance outcomes.

Many disciplines consider the job characteristics model when examining specific work situations. For example, information system researchers have extended the job characteristics model when considering the unique attributes of programmers. Goldstein and Rockart (1984) point out that the original JCM model assumes that workers operate independently and that this assumption conflicts with much of the IT work completed in organizations. To explore this aspect, he studies the relationship between job satisfaction and role conflict, role ambiguity and quality of leadership. The JCM has been criticized for its inability to exclude worker perceptions versus actual job characteristics and its susceptibility to external influences such as social cues and personal factors (Fried and Ferris 1987; Roberts and Glick 1981). The JCM’s primary strength is its ability to assess a more complete set of personal and organizational outcomes based on the characteristics of a particular job versus profession (Chen 2008). A meta-analysis of JCM studies found a mean correlation of .39 between job characteristics and job satisfaction which is nearly twice that of the mean correlations reported for meta-analyses of TVC studies (Loher et al. 1985).

Within the domain of information systems implementations, Morris and Venkatesh (2010) incorporated the job characteristics model when considering the effects of an ERP system rollout on employee’s jobs. They examined how job characteristics (skill variety, autonomy, and feedback) impacted job satisfaction and found the ERP implementation moderated these relationships. Prior to this work, little consideration was given to how such large scale technological changes affected employees and their jobs.

**Occupational Commitment**

Allen and Meyer (1990) proposed a three factor model comprised of affective, continuance and normative commitment that integrated notions from an array of previous theories on occupational commitment. Subsequent empirical studies have found that affective commitment is the strongest predictor of positive organizational outcomes such as low turnover rates, performance, and organizational citizenship (Cho and Huang 2012). Continuance commitment is also a significant predictor of organizational outcomes in some professions but appears to be less stable in the IT profession (Dockel et al. 2006). Several scholars suggest that Becker’s (1960) side-bet theory comes into play as IT professionals tend to be young, single, and childless, which reduces their ancillary reasons for continuing in a particular job or profession (Cho...
and Huang 2012). Ease of moving to a new job and job availability further reduce the impact of continuance commitment in IT professions (Dockel et al. 2006). Normative commitment tends to share antecedents with affective and continuance commitment (Meyer et al. 2002) and its effect is moderated by continuance commitment. Thus, normative commitment has less relevance in the IT domain where continuance commitment is largely driven by side-bet factors.

Model and Hypotheses Development

TVC postulates that high congruence between occupational characteristics and individual interests will result in positive outcomes such as occupational satisfaction (Holland 1996). Similarly, we suggest that high congruence between professionals’ job characteristics perceptions and individual interests may lead to high occupational satisfaction. We position these as competing hypotheses. In both cases we model the impact of occupational congruence as a direct antecedent of occupational satisfaction. Thus, our first two hypotheses become:

H1a: Congruence between an individual’s TVC personality theme classification and the TVC theme classification assigned by O*NET to their current occupation heightens the individual’s occupational satisfaction.

H1b: Congruence between an individual’s TVC personality theme classification and their perceptions regarding the TVC classification of their current position heightens their occupational satisfaction.

JCM contends that five core job characteristics including task significance, task variety, task identity, task autonomy, and task feedback influence personal and work outcomes including job satisfaction (Hackman and Oldham 1976) forming the basis for our next five hypotheses:

H2a: Task significance is positively associated with occupational satisfaction.

H2b: Task variety is positively associated with occupational satisfaction.

H2c: Task identity is positively associated with occupational satisfaction.

H2d: Task autonomy is positively associated with occupational satisfaction.

H2e: Task feedback is positively associated with occupational satisfaction.

Consistent with Allen and Meyer’s (1990) organizational commitment model, we propose that occupational satisfaction leads to high affective commitment and high continuance commitment. Based on previous findings (Dockel et al. 2006; Powell and Meyer 2004), we do not expect normative commitment to be a significant outcome of occupational satisfaction. Thus, our final two hypotheses are:

H3: Occupational satisfaction is positively associated with occupational affective commitment.

H4: Occupational satisfaction is positively associated with occupational continuance commitment.

![Figure 1: Research Model](image)

*Twenty-third Americas Conference on Information Systems, Boston, 2017*
Methodology

Measurement and Data Collection

We collected the study data using an electronic survey instrument that contained six blocks of questions drawing all measures from the existing literature. IT occupations were drawn from the BLS Occupational Handbook (BLS 2016b). Forty-two items to assess individuals’ RAISEC scores were drawn from My Next Move Interest Profiler (BLS 2016a). Although some research has recommended developing domain-specific RAISEC scales to better represent newer occupational characteristics and interests (Armstrong et al. 2008), we explicitly avoided attempts to improve the methodology as our goal was to assess the congruence methods as currently employed in the career counseling environment. Six new slider bar measures were developed to assess individuals’ perceptions regarding the RAISEC characteristics of their current position. The scalar measures ranged from 0 to 10 with end points anchored with very rarely and very often. Ten items, two for each of the five JCM dimensions of task significance, task identity, skill variety, autonomy, feedback, and occupational satisfaction, were drawn from Morris and Venkatesh (2010) where they exhibited Cronbach alpha reliability coefficients of .79, .76, .75, .71, .75, and .75 respectively. Three items to assess occupational satisfaction were also drawn from Morris and Venkatesh (2010) where the construct exhibited a Cronbach alpha reliability coefficient of .75. Finally, items to assess affective and continuance occupational commitment were drawn from Meyer et al. (1993) where they exhibited Cronbach alpha reliability coefficients of .87 and .79.

The pilot sample was drawn from known IT professionals in the researchers’ professional networks. A total of 179 email messages were sent to respondents with each message containing a link to the survey instrument. One week later, 72 responses were collected; a 41% response rate. The average age of respondents was 33 and 19% of the respondents were female, which is in line with previous studies that have noted gender disparity in IT occupations (Rosenbloom et al. 2008). Respondents’ TVC theme classifications were determined by first identifying each respondent’s first, second, and third highest RAISEC scores and then assigning the appropriate TVC theme classification. Next, we used O*NET to identify the TVC theme classification for the respondents’ professed occupation. This was used to calculate O*NET to personality (OTOP) congruence using Brown and Gore’s (1994) congruence index formula which was shown to be superior to other algebraic congruence formulas in their testing. Although prior research has identified a number of methodological issues with algebraic congruence formulas (Edwards 1994), this type of formula was required in our study to remain consistent with current occupational counseling practices. Finally, we used the slider bar measures to determine each respondents’ perceptions regarding the first, second, and third highest RAISEC characteristics for their current occupation. We then assigned the appropriate TVC theme classification to the position and calculated position to personality (PTOP) congruence.

Results

We analyzed the proposed model using PLS, a predictive modeling technique that performs bootstrap resampling as a non-parametric means of drawing statistical inferences based on the provided sample. PLS is robust to small sample sizes and does not rely on the assumptions of normality required for parametric inferential analysis (Pratyush N. S. and Kim 2013). We utilized the PLSPM package in R to perform both item validation and predictive analysis.

Measurement Model

The suitability of the measures was assessed using tests of convergent validity, discriminant validity, and reliability. To assess convergent validity of the multi-item measures, we examined the “on-factor” loadings and squared correlation coefficients provided by the PLSPM output (see Figure 2). Each item loaded strongly on its hypothesized construct. When assessing discriminant validity we noted that some items had high cross-loadings, such as Satisfaction (SAT) on Affective Commitment (AC). However, these must be assessed with the theorized relationships in mind. Satisfaction is theorized as an antecedent of Affective Commitment. Accordingly, a high cross loadings were expected. To further substantiate the discriminate validity of the scales, the square root of the average variance extracted (AVE) was checked for each multi-item construct to ensure that it was higher than the construct’s correlations with all other
constructs. The results in Table 1 show that each construct’s square root of the AVE exceeded its correlations with all other constructs. Reliability was assessed using composite reliability scores. All were above 0.70; indicating that for this particular population of participants, the scales exhibited an acceptable level of reliability (Wilkinson 1999).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>AVE</th>
<th>α</th>
<th>OtoP</th>
<th>PtoP</th>
<th>TS</th>
<th>TI</th>
<th>TV</th>
<th>TA</th>
<th>TF</th>
<th>SAT</th>
<th>AC</th>
<th>CC</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>OtoP</td>
<td>9.01</td>
<td>3.1</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>PtoP</td>
<td>8.92</td>
<td>3.7</td>
<td>0.30 *</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>TI</td>
<td>11.6</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0.86</td>
<td>0.15</td>
<td>0.89</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>TV</td>
<td>10.5</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0.77</td>
<td>0.12</td>
<td>0.03</td>
<td>0.35 **</td>
<td>0.83 ***</td>
<td>0.90</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>TA</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>0.82</td>
<td>0.19</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td>0.4 **</td>
<td>0.67 ***</td>
<td>0.84 ***</td>
<td>0.92</td>
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<tr>
<td>TF</td>
<td>13.2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0.84</td>
<td>0.07</td>
<td>0.39 **</td>
<td>0.47 ***</td>
<td>0.47 ***</td>
<td>0.58 **</td>
<td>0.38 **</td>
<td>0.93</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>SAT</td>
<td>15.1</td>
<td>3.6</td>
<td>0.85</td>
<td>0.09</td>
<td>0.08</td>
<td>0.26 **</td>
<td>0.52 ***</td>
<td>0.47 ***</td>
<td>0.58 **</td>
<td>0.93</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>AC</td>
<td>23.1</td>
<td>5.2</td>
<td>0.87</td>
<td>0.16</td>
<td>0.06</td>
<td>0.08</td>
<td>0.16</td>
<td>0.26</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td>0.36 **</td>
<td>0.47 ***</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>CC</td>
<td>14.1</td>
<td>6.6</td>
<td>0.88</td>
<td>0.16</td>
<td>0.06</td>
<td>0.08</td>
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<td>0.02</td>
<td>0.36 **</td>
<td>0.47 ***</td>
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</table>

Note: OtoP = O*NET to Person congruence, PtoP = Position to Person congruence, TS = Task Significance, TI = Task Identity, TV = Task Variety, TA = Task Autonomy, TF = Task Feedback, SAT = Satisfaction, AC = Affective Commitment, CC = Continuance Commitment, * ρ < 0.05, ** ρ < 0.01, *** ρ < 0.001

Table 1: Reliability and descriptive statistics

Structural Model

Hypotheses were tested by examining the structural model results. We began by calculating path coefficients and R² values. We then utilized bootstrap resampling to determine t statistics and significance values. Figure 2 shows the results of the predictive model analysis including path β coefficients, associated ρ values, and R² value for each dependent variable. Overall, the model accounted for significant variance in occupational satisfaction (R² = 0.65) and occupational affective commitment (R² = 0.57). However, the model explained very little of the variance in occupational continuance commitment (R² = 0.06).

Figure 2: PLS Structural Model
Our tests showed that neither OTOP Congruence ($\beta = .02, \rho = .811$) nor PTOP Congruence ($\beta = .02, \rho = .811$) had significant influence on occupational satisfaction. Thus, neither H1a nor H1b were supported. However, three JCM dimensions including task variety ($\beta = .33, \rho < .001$), task identity ($\beta = .25, \rho = .008$), and task autonomy ($\beta = .25, \rho = .021$) were associated with increases in occupational satisfaction, providing support for H2b, H2c, and H2D. The influence of task significance ($\beta = .16, \rho = .077$) on occupational satisfaction was approaching significance. Given our small sample size, this relationship warrants additional scrutiny. Task feedback ($\beta = .07, \rho = .508$) was not found to be significantly related to occupational satisfaction, thus H2e was rejected. Finally, occupational satisfaction was significantly and positively associated with occupational affective commitment ($\beta = .75, \rho < .001$) providing support for H3. However, there was no significant association between occupational satisfaction and occupational continuance commitment ($\beta = .10, \rho = .370$), thus H4 was rejected. We conducted post-hoc power analyses using G*Power (Faul et al. 2007) and found that our sample provided an observed statistical power of 0.60 for occupational satisfaction and 0.90 for both of the occupational commitment constructs.

**Discussion**

Our study results indicate that TVC congruence has little influence on the occupational satisfaction of IT professionals. This is consistent with prior research that found a near-zero correlation between congruence, academic major satisfaction, and performance of students who planned to pursue an IT career (Young et al. 2016). Several reasons could account for these findings. First, the items contained on most career interest profilers have changed little since TVC was first introduced (Holland 1959). Accordingly, it is entirely possible that the items do not adequately represent the types of tasks that IT-oriented individuals like to do. A second possibility is that the TVC theme classifications assigned to IT occupations do not adequately represent the real work that is done in those occupations. However, we tested for this possibility in our results and found that even when a TVC theme classification was assigned based on professionals’ perceptions of their occupation, congruence between that classification and the individual’s personality had low correlation with their occupational satisfaction. A third possibility is that IT professionals are more satisfied working in secure and lucrative occupations even if the field is not a perfect match with their personality. Regardless of the reason, our results call into question the applicability of TVC when providing IT-related career counseling, particularly for students considering an IT-related major for post-secondary education. The statistically non-significant relationship between occupational satisfaction and continuance commitment is particularly noteworthy in the IT domain. The IT field is currently characterized as having the highest employee turnover rate among all jobs at Fortune 500 companies, and the lowest average employee tenure (Tech Republic 2017). In a field with near-zero unemployment and aggressive recruiting practices the lack of continuance commitment may be more a result of exceptional opportunity than low occupational satisfaction. The ability to move laterally from one IT occupation to another (i.e. application developer to web developer) in a vibrant labor market may further confound the relationship between these variables.

As with all research, our results must be interpreted with regard to several limitations. First, when comparing competing models, one must be cognizant of the operational boundaries of the theoretical models and ensure the research design does not unfairly favor one model over the other (Cooper and Richardson 1986). While we believe we have assessed the competing models in an unbiased manner to determine their impact on occupational satisfaction, the results should be interpreted with the limitations of comparing competing models in mind. Second, while we found relatively robust results for the occupational commitment constructs, only a modest observed statistical power was achieved for occupational satisfaction given our small sample size. However, in light of the very distinct differences in $\rho$ values between our significant and non-significant predictors, it appears unlikely that the results would change with an increase in statistical power. A third potential limitation of the study is that all of the measures used self-reported values. Accordingly, it is possible that different results could be achieved if other types of measures were employed. Finally, as this was a pilot study, the respondents were drawn from a convenience sample of IT professionals which may be less robust than random sampling methods.
Our research identifies several areas ripe for further exploration. Our findings on congruence models suggest that much work could be done to modernize the basic Holland (Holland 1959) framework to accommodate newer employment domains such as IT. A complimentary task would be to re-conceptualize the job codes for specific IT professions in light of the industry’s rapid evolution in recent years. This likely involves large-scale studies to determine the classic Holland characteristics or newly defined characteristics that best describe IT occupations. Another area where additional research is warranted is the study of alternative job and academic major counseling techniques. Experiments comparing the effectiveness of traditional counseling methods versus alternative methods based on JCM principles would shed substantial insight into the effectiveness of various approaches.

Conclusion

Our study adds to the theoretical literature base for both IT career counseling and job satisfaction by empirically evaluating the relative strength of occupational congruence methods versus the JCM as predictors of occupational satisfaction. Given the dearth of experimental data assessing career counseling models in the IT field, our study provides important insights into the applicability of popular theoretical frameworks in the IT domain. While a subset of JCM constructs including task variety, task identity, and task autonomy were strong predictors of occupational satisfaction, we found no support for occupational congruence as a predictor of positive job outcomes. Our results remained consistent despite testing congruence models based on DOL job codes as well as job codes derived from current IT professionals. Lastly, occupational satisfaction was strongly predictive of affective commitment, but not indicative of continuance commitment. This suggests that the drivers of continuance commitment in the IT field are not captured by current models of vocational compatibility or work characteristics. Our findings have important practical implications for employers, career counselors, students, and potential employees. They suggest that current occupational counseling techniques may not be effective for identifying individuals well-suited to IT occupations. They further suggest that stressing certain factors from the JCM in job postings and academic advising may resonate better than interest compatibility with prospective employees or students.

References and Citations


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