

Chapter 9

A Social Capital Perspective on IT Professionals' Work Behavior and Attitude

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ABSTRACT

Attracting and retaining information technology (IT) professionals is a current concern for companies. Although research has been conducted about the job behavior and attitudes of IT professionals over the past three decades, little research has explored the effect of IT professionals' social capital. The primary research question that this study addresses is how social capital affects IT professionals' work attitude and behavior, including job satisfaction and job performance. Data were collected from 128 IT professionals from a range of jobs, organizations and industries. Results indicate that the strength of the ties an IT professional has in his or her organization is positively related to job satisfaction. The number of ties that an IT professional has outside the organization is also positively related to job performance. Several implications for research and practice are offered based on these findings.

INTRODUCTION

Despite the prevalence of outsourcing and globalization, information technology (IT) executives rank attracting, developing and retaining IT professionals as their top concern. Successful retention

of IT professionals is critical to organizational computing in order to provide continuity in IT development, support, and vendor relationships. Much research has been conducted about how to manage, recruit, and retain IT professionals with regard to a variety of topics including motivation,

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job satisfaction, knowledge and skill sets, career anchors, and turnover (Agarwal & Ferratt, 2001, 2002; Rutner, Hardgrave & McKnight, 2008).

Research in this area has been drawn largely from theories based in psychology and has examined the constructs of interest from an individual, or cognitive, perspective. Extensive research has been conducted about what motivates IT professionals, but very little examines the effect of social relationships on IT professionals' behavior and attitude. Some researchers suggest that IT professionals have lower social needs than other professionals (Couger, Oppermann & Amoroso, 1994), yet others find that there is no difference between IT and non-IT professionals regarding social needs (Wynekoop & Walz, 1998). Unfortunately, much of the research in this vein has stopped with examining the extent to which social needs are important to IT professionals. Little research has explored the extent to which the social component may impact IT professionals' work behavior and attitudes.

Because IT is becoming increasingly integrated with the business departments and functions of organizations, IT professionals are expected to work effectively with many different groups of people. It is critical that they develop and build relationships with their business partners/clients. Furthermore, IT professionals work not only in face-to-face teams, but are increasingly working in self-managed or virtual teams. Thus, the role of social factors may be critical in shedding light on IT professionals' work behavior and attitudes. Theories grounded in social capital may provide an important and useful lens through which to examine this phenomenon. Complementing the traditional focus on individual attributes, the social capital perspective focuses on the relationships among individuals. Social capital theory provides a fine-grained analysis of how social ties affect individuals' work attitude and behavior through a variety of mechanisms. However, this theoretical lens has not been widely used to examine the attitudes and behavior of IT professionals.

The purpose of this study is to examine how the social capital IT professionals build within their organizations and within the IT profession impact their work behavior and attitudes. The primary research question addressed is how social capital affects IT professionals' work attitude and behavior including job satisfaction and job performance. The study examines the influence of two aspects of social capital on IT professionals' job attitude and work behavior: tie strength and the number of ties.

The rest of the paper is organized as follows. First, a rationale is provided for why it is important to extend prior work on social capital influences on the IT profession. Next, the theoretical foundation for the study is provided, and hypotheses are formulated. The methodology is then discussed, the data analysis is provided, and the results are discussed. Finally, implications of the research are presented along with implications for practice and for future research.

IT PROFESSIONALS

This study provides insight specifically into the role of social capital in the work attitude and behavior of IT professionals. It is important to examine IT professionals apart from other professionals for several reasons. A strong IT staff with technical skills, business understanding and problem solving orientation is a valuable asset for an organization and can contribute significantly to developing long-term competitiveness. Despite the importance of this critical resource, attracting and retaining IT staff remains a key and difficult issue with which industry and researchers alike still grapple. The IT profession is faced with higher turnover rates than many other professions, and it is increasingly difficult for organizations to retain IT employees (Agarwal, Brown, Ferratt & Moore, 2006).

Another reason to focus on IT professionals is that they are identified as a distinct occupational

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