

WORK MOTIVATION  
IN THE CONTEXT OF A  
GLOBALIZING ECONOMY

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Personal Initiative (PI):  
The Theoretical Concept  
and Empirical Findings

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In this chapter I want to discuss the concept of personal initiative (PI). I shall first argue that it is practically and theoretically useful. Then I shall discuss the concept and a theoretical framework. Further I present what we know about PI and what we still need to know.

PI is an important concept both for practical and theoretical reasons. Practically, PI has been used, for example, in assessment centers. PI will become more important in the future because future workplaces will require a high degree of self-reliance (Frese, 1997). Companies are interested in PI because it increases organizational effectiveness.

Theoretically, PI is related to a number of new performance concepts that are indirectly related to organizational effectiveness: intrapreneurship (Hisrich, 1990), organizational citizenship behavior (Organ, 1988), organizational spontaneity (George & Brief, 1992; Katz, 1964), generic work behavior (Hunt, Hansen, & Paajanen, 1994), and contextual performance (Borman & Motowidlo, 1993).

## THE CONCEPT OF PERSONAL INITIATIVE

We think of PI to be a behavior syndrome resulting in an individual's taking a self-starting, active, and persistent approach to work. Additional aspects of the concept are that this behavior is consistent with the organization's mission, goal directed, and action oriented (cf. Frese, Fay, Hilburger, Leng, & Tag, 1997; Frese, Kring, Soose, & Zempel, 1996). An updated review of the concept of personal initiative is available in Frese and Fay (2002).

A syndrome is a set of co-occurring behaviors that together signify initiative. In our view this behavior syndrome can best be explained within an action theoretical approach (Frese & Sabini, 1985; Frese & Zapf, 1994; Hacker, 1985). Actions are goal oriented and guided by the goal. At work, the goals are heavily influenced by the tasks required of the individual job incumbent. However, there is a translation process from the outside task into goals—the redefinition process (Hackman, 1970). For example, a secretary may redefine her task to imply that she should also make sure that her boss is updated on problems in the work group, although this is not mentioned in the official task description. This redefinition process allows to define *extrarole goals* and goals that require a self-starting approach, and thus PI (Staw & Boettger, 1990).

Self-starting implies that the goals are not given by somebody else but that the person him- or herself develops those goals. At work, tasks are usually presented within a given occupational role (Katz, 1964). Thus, extrarole behaviors can be counted as self-started behaviors. For this reason, we used to operationalize PI by extra-role behavior (cf. Frese, et al., 1997). This has led to the conceptual problem that in some jobs the role ascriptions are so broad that practically any behavior is within-role behavior, for example, in the case of entrepreneurs or top managers who have to do everything to make the company survive and grow. When roles expectations do not really specify the expected behavior in some detail, then the issue of extrarole behavior becomes meaningless. However, self-starting behavior is still possible in such cases, although it may refer to the development of subgoals. Although all entrepreneurs have the general goal of producing efficiently, excellent entrepreneurs use the strategy more frequently to enhance PI in their employees (Goebel, 1998). In this case, it is the formation of the subgoal—enhancing PI—that is self-starting.

An active approach implies that a person is proactive. This means that they should attempt to get feedback and develop signals that signify future problems and to develop plans to actively prevent these problems from occurring.

Implementation of long-term goals often leads to new problems, barriers, and setbacks. Since new suggestions for work improvement, new procedures to do things, and other attempts have not been tried before, one will experience difficulties. For example, the supervisor may not like the new idea, or a new work procedure cannot be performed correctly in the beginning. If one does not overcome these difficulties or gives up quickly in face of barriers, there is no initiative.

Initiative, therefore, implies that one will deal with these obstacles actively and persistently.

## Personal Initiative, Entrepreneurship and Organizational Citizenship

PI is related to but not identical with other constructs, such as entrepreneurship and intrapreneurship (Hisrich, 1990) and organizational citizenship behavior (OCB; Munene, 1995; Organ, 1990). PI and entrepreneurship both imply the use of productive, creative, and active strategies and to overcome problems in case they occur. However, the commercial component is not included in the concept of initiative.

Both OCB and PI go beyond direct role requirements, and both are seen to contribute indirectly to organizational effectiveness (Organ, 1988). However, there are also differences. Empirically, OCB is mainly made up of two factors: altruism and compliance. Compliance has a more passive connotation, e.g., conscientiousness in attendance (“does not take extra breaks”), adherence to rules, and other behaviors. In contrast, the concept of PI often implies a certain rebellious element towards the supervisor. OCB takes the framework of the supervisor as the starting point—how helpful the worker is from the supervisor's perspective. However, supervisors often fail to support PI and even punish active approaches. We think that the time perspective is different. A worker with high PI contributes to long-range positive outcomes for the organization, but in the short term he or she may well be a nuisance factor to the boss because he or she is constantly pushing new ideas (cf. some graphic descriptions on this issue appear in Peters & Waterman, 1982). In contrast, OCB is more oriented toward a short-term positive social orientation at the workplace; some even argue that OCB and ingratiation behaviors are similar (Eastman, 1994). Additionally, as George and Brief (1992) have pointed out, OCB includes role-prescribed behaviors whereas PI does not.

## Personal Initiative and Organizational Effectiveness

PI should be related to organizational effectiveness (Motowidlo & Scotter, 1994). There are two avenues why this should be so. First, on the level of the organization and the team, there are no perfect production or service systems, and, therefore, there is some need for PI to uphold and to improve production or service (Katz, 1964; Organ, 1988). For example, if a machine breaks down and the worker is able to fix it or tell the repairperson what to do (although all of this is not part of his or her job description), organizational effectiveness is enhanced.

Second, there should be a higher degree of task performance of employees with higher initiative. Hacker (1992; cf. also Frese & Zapf, 1994) and Klemp

and McClelland (1986) have shown that excellent employees are characterized by a longer time perspective in their work, a better developed mental model of it, and a more proactive approach to work. The long-term orientation and the proactive approach is shared by our concept of PI and the behavior and strategies of superworkers.

## A MODEL OF PERSONAL INITIATIVE

Figure 7.1 displays a model of PI. Similar to other motivational theories (e.g., Ford, 1992), we assume that behavior is a function of Motivation  $\times$  Skills  $\times$  Responsive Environment, given some (biological or biographical) prerequisites (the latter is not included in our model). Thus, there is a differentiation between skills, a responsive environment (environmental supports), and motivation (personality and orientations). The motivational constructs are differentiated into distal and proximal (Kanfer, 1992) or generalized and specific constructs (Rotter, 1975)—the distal/generalized constructs being personality factors and the proximal/specific constructs being orientations.

The model roughly assumes that environmental supports, skills, and personality factors contribute to orientations that in turn lead to PI. Thus, orientations are mediators in this model. There are three entry points for the change of initiative: first, the environmental supports may be increased; second, the skills can be enhanced;

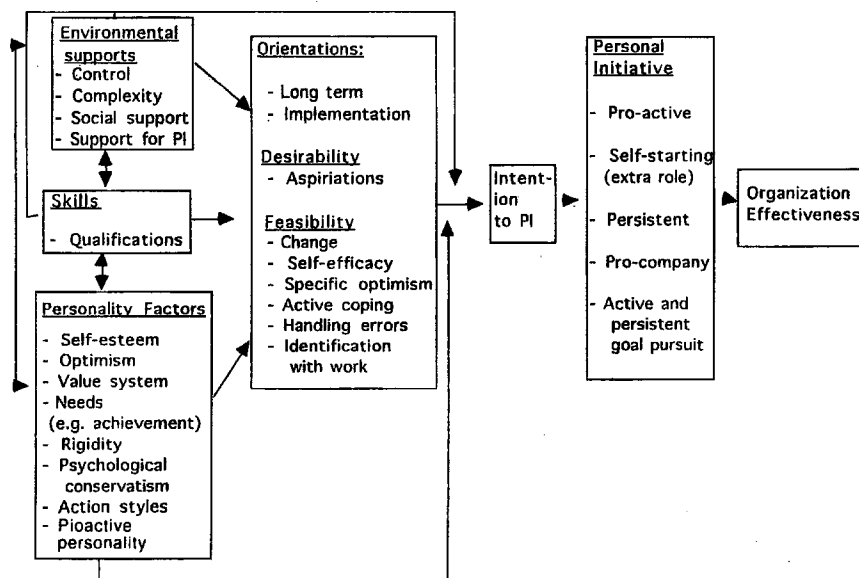


FIG. 7.1. A model of the functioning of personal initiative (PI).

and third, the orientations can be changed. Personality factors are assumed to be more constant.

## Orientations

Orientations are behavior tendencies of moderate situational specificity. Thus, all the orientations in the figure refer to work. PI should be influenced by aspiration for control, that is, a desire to “be on top of things” (De Charms, 1968; Deci & Ryan, 1985; Frese, Garst, & Fay, 2001).

Self-efficacy (Bandura, 1986, 1977) is related to PI because one should have the expectation that one is able to do things adequately in order to show initiative (Speier & Frese, 1997). Self-efficacy implies that one achieves the positive outcomes through one’s own actions. This is in contrast to optimism, which implies that positive outcomes may come about without having to do something for it. Thus, there may be optimism because one perceives oneself as the “mover” of things (and, thus, shows initiative) or one may be optimistic because things will work out by themselves. S. Taylor (1989) has argued that optimism has an energizing function leading to a higher degree of active approaches to life. If she is right, there should be a correlation between (specific) optimism and initiative.

Change orientation is necessary because PI usually changes the work situation in one way or the other. If one is afraid of such changes, there should be little initiative.

Active coping strategies (Folkman & Lazarus, 1980) imply that one actively deals with problems that are perceived to be aversive. Often, a person will show PI because something is bothering her or him at work.

Another issue refers to error handling. PI often implies that *new* activities have to be attempted and, therefore, some degree of uncertainty of outcomes exists. Thus, the more a person shows initiative, the more there are chances of making errors. We assume, therefore, that confidence of error handling, risking errors, and a low anxiety of errors should be related to PI (Rybowiak, Garst, Frese, & Batinic, 1999).

Finally, identification with work should be related to PI because work then is valued more strongly (as in optimism, this should be a low relationship because a person might think that work is very important without showing initiative).

## Personality Factors

Both orientations and personality factors are action tendencies. We think that the personality factors are different from orientations on four dimensions:

- action tendency
- generality: cross-situational consistency
- endurance: consistency over time
- modifiability

Within action theory, we conceptualize personality constructs to consist of three aspects: propensities to act; a generalized, and automatic use of a tendency to act (Baron, 1981; Frese, Stewart, & Hannover, 1987). Propensity to act means that a certain action pattern comes to mind first and is put into effect as long as there are no situational constraints (or affordances) to do otherwise. Orientations should be more highly related to actions because they are more specific to the area of behavior (work, in our case); (cf. Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975, for a similar argument on the match between attitude and behavior).

A personality trait to be generalized implies that a certain action pattern is shown in different situations. Of course, there is a dimension from specificity to generality (Rotter, 1975). Personality factors are more general than orientations.

Automaticity means that the use of a metacognitive approach has been overlearned and is habitual. This does not mean that one automatically uses a certain behavior pattern. Rather, it means, for example, that a rule of thumb (heuristic) to develop long-range goals is developed quickly vis-à-vis a new task without having to make a conscious decision that one wants to develop a long-range goal. The person may still choose not to act according to a long-range goal; it is just the first idea that comes to mind. Personality factors are probably more strongly automatized than orientations.

Modifiability, that is, the degree to which change occurs because of experiences and training, should be higher for orientations than for personality variables. Modifiability should be related to both automaticity and generality. If an action tendency is automatically invoked and quite general, it is less likely to be to be changed even if somebody is trained not to use this action, because every training is specific. While I may change my approach toward a specific object, I do not necessarily have to change my general action tendencies. The more it is automatic, the more it will be resistant to change because it is overlearned (similar to habits that are difficult to break even if one actually wants to get rid of them).

The higher modifiability of orientation is one reason why orientations are entry points for change. Thus, if one wants to change initiative, we assume that it is useful to change responsibility and control aspirations, self-efficacy, and change orientation (which empirically are most closely associated with initiative) (Frese et al., in press).

Important personality factors for PI are self-esteem, general optimism, need for achievement, flexibility (the reverse of psychological conservatism), proactive personality (Crant, 1995), and action styles (like goal orientation and action orientation). All of these personality traits are factors activating people and should, therefore, contribute to initiative.

It is important to note that a certain construct may appear both as a personality factor and an orientation. For example, a generalized form of self-efficacy (orientation) is self-esteem (personality). Specific forms of hope (with regard to work and unemployment) are orientations, whereas general optimism is a personality factor. Need for achievement is a general trait, whereas control and responsibility aspirations for work is an orientation.

The more specific orientations should be influenced by personality factors as described in Fig. 7.1. Thus, a highly generalized concept (e.g., self-esteem) should have an influence on the more specific orientation (e.g., self-efficacy).

## Skills and Environmental Supports

There are three environmental conditions that help the development of PI: control at work, complexity of work, and the support for PI given by the company and the immediate supervisor. All three are supposed to activate people and to make it possible for them to overcome barriers, once they occur. A similar argument can be made for skills. Control at work, complexity, and social support have been shown to be important parameters of occupational socialization (Frese, 1982; Semmer & Schallberger, 1996). Qualifications are obviously important to understand the workplace better and to produce ideas for changing the workplace (which is one prerequisite of initiative).

Environmental supports and skills should be related to PI via the mediators orientations. Two examples: Control and complexity at work should have an influence on self-efficacy (Speier & Frese, 1997) and control aspirations. One important source for developing self-efficacy is enactive mastery. "In the work context, enactive mastery can be experienced when one is able to make decisions, to work on challenging tasks, and to make use of one's competencies"—variables that are related to control and complexity (Speier & Frese, 1997, p. 175). Similarly, control aspirations are hypothesized to be lowered or increased by whether or not one actually has control at work (Frese, 1984). Reasons for this are similar: If workers do not have access to control their environment and their own behaviors at the workplace, their aspirations for control are reduced because of helplessness (Frese et al., 2001).

## EVIDENCE FOR THE MODEL

With three steps we have attempted to test the overall model in a longitudinal study in eastern Germany (details on sample and measures in Frese, Kring, Soose, & Sempel, 1996; Frese, Fay, Hilburger, Leng, & Tag, 1997). First, a multiple correlation of all predictors, that is, environmental supports, skills, personality factors, and orientations with PI was .63 for the questionnaire measure of PI and .57 with the interview-based behavioral measure. Since the latter does not have common method variance with the questionnaire-based predictors, this is a good correlation. Figure 7.2 presents the results when the three best predictors (measured at the third measurement point of our study) were related to whether or not people showed a high degree of PI (operationalization of high initiative:  $M$  plus 1  $SD$  at measurement wave 4). Only 4% of those with low control at work, low qualifications, and low aspirations for control and responsibility showed a high degree of initiative, whereas 29% of those with high scores on the predictors showed a high degree of initiative.

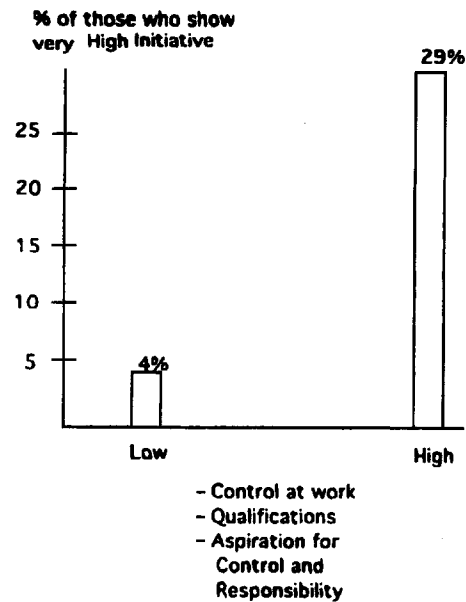


FIG. 7.2. Prediction of initiative (t4) by 3 important predictors (t3).

Second, in a longitudinal analysis, change of interview-based PI was predicted with a significant increment. A hierarchical regression analysis showed that all predictors (environment, skills, personality lagged, orientations concurrent) produced an increment of 11% over and above earlier PI in the prediction of later initiative.

Finally, using the same approach as in the second step, a multiple partial correlation procedure substantiated the mediator function of the orientations (James & Brett, 1984). The three predictor areas of environmental support, skills, and personality without orientations predicted change in PI with an increment of R2 delta of .06 ( $p < .01$ ). When orientations were partialled out in addition to the effect of earlier initiative, this led to a nonsignificant R2 delta of .02.

This speaks for the viability of the model. Obviously, this can only be a first test of the full model. Further LISREL analyses that look at the processes in much more detail are currently undertaken (Frese et al., 2001).

## FUTURE RESEARCH ISSUES

There are at least four future research issues. First, the effect of each of the orientations has to be looked at in much more detail. An example of how this should be done is our article on self-efficacy (Speier & Frese, 1997).

Second, there should be reverse causations, in line with Kohn's and Schooler's (1978) concept of reciprocal relationship between job conditions and personal effects. We hypothesize that PI has have an influence on skills and on control and complexity of work (Frese et al., 2001). Since high PI also implies the motivation to get additional vocational education, skills should be enhanced with initiative. People with high PI will attempt to get jobs with higher control and complexity of work.

Third, one would suppose that there are interaction effects of orientations with environmental supports, skills, and personality factors. One example may suffice: Self-efficacy may have a compensatory relationship with control at work and complexity. Having little control at work may be an important predictor for people with high PI because they will show high PI in any case (because of their subjective expectations of effectiveness). In contrast to people with low self-efficacy, the degree of control at work should be a more important determiner of PI because they will depend much more on job characteristics to instigate PI (cf. Speier & Frese, 1997, for the evidence).

Fourth, we ought to look into the process of the development of PI in much more detail. For example, we should know in much more detail what is the actual trigger of PI: Is it the feeling that one needs to do something because nobody else will? Is it the feeling of being fed up with an inefficient procedure at work, the positive concept that one can do much better, and other factors? Both Kuhl's (1992) as well as Gollwitzer's (1993) work are examples of such process analyses in a related area.

Since PI is of high importance in most jobs and will be of higher importance in the future, it is tantamount to understand which organizational and individual conditions increase or undercut personal initiative.

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## 8

## Feedback-Expectation Discrepancy, Arousal and Locus of Cognition

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Feedback interventions (FIs), that is, providing people with some information regarding their task performance, yield highly variable effects on performance (Balcazar, Hopkins, & Suarez, 1985; Ilgen, Fisher, & Taylor, 1979; Kluger & DeNisi, 1996; Latham & Locke, 1991; Salmoni, Schmidt, & Walter, 1984). Indeed, a meta-analysis suggested that FIs reduce performance in over one third of the cases (Kluger & DeNisi, 1996), a fact that is contrary to the common belief that FIs most often improve performance. Furthermore, Kluger and DeNisi (1996) found no evidence that the effects of FIs are moderated by FI sign. That is, negative FIs (information about failure) and positive FIs (information about success) do not differ on average in their performance effects (Kluger & DeNisi, 1996). The goal of this chapter is to investigate the possible causes for this counterintuitive finding. Specifically, the aim of this chapter is to investigate the effects of FI sign on affect and cognition. Understanding the effects of FI sign on affect and cognition is a first step towards understanding the role of FI sign in moderating the effects of FIs on performance.

The central argument of this chapter is that FI sign triggers a reaction from two parallel mechanisms that support adaptation. One mechanism operates with a symmetrical rule and the other with an asymmetrical rule. The symmetrical rule is manifested in a theoretical approach that emphasizes the sensitivity of people to discrepancies between standards and feedback (e.g., control theory).