



Unmet Expectations and Job Withdrawal Behavior: A Moderated Mediation Model

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Abstract. It has been demonstrated that job withdrawal behavior is a workplace behavior with negative consequences. Although extant research has extensively explored its antecedents, little consideration has been given to the effect of unmet expectations. In the context of Chinese companies that emphasize the orientation of collectivism, we developed and tested a model that incorporates the gap between actual work and significant others' work expectations with job withdrawal behavior. Our analysis of self-reported data from 482 employees showed that the gap between actual work and significant others' work expectations was directly and positively related to employees' job withdrawal behavior as well as indirectly and positively related to person-job fit. In addition, external employability was found to act as a critical factor. With specific reference to this, the negative impact of person-job fit on job withdrawal behavior was stronger when external employability was higher. Therefore, these findings provided new clues for the predictive mechanism of job withdrawal behavior. Moreover, they also underscored the important impact of the gap between actual work and significant others' work expectations on their workplace attitudes and behaviors in China.

Keywords: unmet expectations · job withdrawal behavior · person-job fit · external employability

1 Introduction

Job withdrawal behavior is generally considered as leaving the workplace for part of the day, the whole day, or permanently (Johns 2002) in a way that usually poses negative consequences for the organization or the individual. For example, lateness, as a form of job withdrawal, can cause more than \$3 billion in annual economic losses to American companies (De Lonzo 2005). In addition, it can also bring about replacement costs (Sagie et al. 2002), loss of productivity and administrative costs (Canrinus et al. 2012).

It is valuable to clarify the mechanisms by which this behavior occurs in light of the destructive consequences of job withdrawal (Berry et al. 2012). The antecedent variables of job withdrawal have been investigated from different perspectives by existing studies. Among them, individual-level variables, for example, emotional stability, extraversion (LeBreton et al. 2004) negatively predict job withdrawal behavior; organizational-level variables encompass team climate (Eder and Eisenberge 2008) and organizational commitment (Nicolas et al. 2015). In terms of leadership styles, such as servant (Zhong et al.

2020) supervisors also inhibit the occurrence of job withdrawal behaviors. Besides, some research showed that the matching state between individual and work will also have an impact on negative behaviors, including withdrawal behavior.

An individual life is composed of work and family, and these two domains can reinforce each other (Xanthopoulou et al. 2009). However, the aforementioned research on predictors of job withdrawal behavior lacked discussion of non-work factors, one of which was the expectation of significant others related to the employee. Especially in China, a country that emphasizes collectivist orientation and role norms, individual workplace behaviors are more susceptible to significant others. Therefore, to address the relative gap in this field, we chose the gap between actual work and significant others' work expectations as an independent variable and investigated whether and how it has an impact on their job withdrawal behavior. Specifically, we tested whether this mechanism occurs through person-job fit. Considering the possible boundary effects of the above process, we regarded external employability as a moderator.

2 Literature Review and Hypotheses

2.1 Unmet Expectations and Job Withdrawal Behavior

The unmet expectation was originally proposed by Porter and Steeers (1973), who defined it as the difference between employees' actual work events and expected ones. Scholars have researched unmet expectations based on the perspective of self-expectancy differences. Through empirical methods, it has been confirmed that the larger unmet expectation can negatively predict positive work states including individual job satisfaction (Maden et al. 2016). Moreover, unmet expectations are also positively interrelated with emotional exhaustion (Schwab et al. 1986) and turnover intentions (Houkes et al. 2003).

China is a country characterized by an orientation for collectivism and strong traditional cultural concepts. Responsibilities and obligations under such norms also have become the core of individual behavior. Therefore, individuals' emotional and behavioral performance are more easily exposed to the influence of others than in other environments. With this in mind, we believe that employees' workplace attitudes and behaviors are influenced not only by the gap between actual work and self-expectation, but also by the gap between actual work and significant others' work expectations (Wang and Yang 2017).

Job withdrawal behavior is a negative workplace behavior. Previous research on its definition can be roughly divided into two schools. Single-type research mainly focuses on a specific form of job withdrawal behavior; overall-type research integrates different manifestations of job withdrawal behaviors into a set and deems such behaviors to be interrelated (Beehr and Gupta 1978). In this study, job withdrawal behavior is defined as a voluntary and purposeful expression of employees, which can be performed by the forms of absence, tardiness, and departure (Hanisch and Hulin 1990).

Vaisey (2006) pointed out that people build a stock of knowledge, skills, and abilities through the higher education system and form expectations regarding the type of work, status, and prestige (Rose 2005). When they find that there is a large gap between their actual and ideal job expectations, employees will witness a decline in job satisfaction due

to a feeling of deprivation (Erdogan and Bauer 2009). In China, individuals are more susceptible to the influence of others, especially family members and close friends. Therefore, a larger gap between actual work and the expectations of significant others can also produce a sense of relative deprivation as well as low job satisfaction. These kinds of negative feelings dampen their willingness to stay in the organization and then prompt them to eventually leave the organization. Therefore, we propose:

Hypothesis 1: The gap between actual work and significant others' work expectations is positively related to job withdrawal behavior.

2.2 Unmet Expectations and Person-Job Fit

Person-job fit belongs to the field of person-environment fit research. Suffice it to say that person-job fit puts the focus on the compatibility of individuals with specific positions or jobs. Based on the demand-supply perspective, when jobs provided in the workplace can meet individual needs, values, or preferences, then employees will be more willing to take action to achieve job matching (Tak 2007). On the contrary, Met Expectation Theory points out that when there is a gap between the individual's reality and his expectations, it will be difficult to promote person-job fit.

Emotion Cognition Theory points out that the process of individual cognition is influenced by other people. Chinese employees tend to have a stronger sense of collectivity than Western employees, and their emotions and behaviors take more into account external things and the environment (Porfeli and Mortimer 2010). In combination with Met Expectation Theory, individuals' unmet expectations usually trigger negative experiences (Wanous et al. 1992). Therefore, it is reasonable to believe that when individuals experience the gap between actual work and significant others' work expectations, they will be influenced by others' evaluations and have a low degree of self-personal fit. In addition, such feedback can render employees the feeling that they have failed to fulfill the expectations or needs of others, resulting in negative psychological and physical health reactions. Besides, it can also make them lack resources and willingness to contribute to the promotion of person-job fit results. Therefore, we propose:

Hypothesis 2: The gap between actual work and significant others' expectations is negatively related to person-job fit.

2.3 The Mediating Role of Person-Job Fit

The research of Roselina (2020) showed that unmet expectations can directly predict job satisfaction and turnover intention, with indirect effects on job withdrawal through negative emotions as well (Wang and Yang 2017). This kind of mechanism might not be single, so this study chose person-job fit as the connection mechanism between them.

The core assumption of the ASA framework states that individuals who perceive themselves to be aligned with the values, goals, and other characteristics of the organization tend to be attracted to the organization, while otherwise, they would be at greater risk of leaving. The evaluation object of one's own and organizational needs and desires is

person-job fit (Edwards 2008), which is significantly negatively correlated with turnover intention (Kristof-Brown et al. 2005).

This study believes that the gap between actual work and significant others' work expectations can be used as a way of employees' perceived evaluation of others. And this gap may lead them to have a perception or result that the degree of person-job fit is low, thus allowing employees to feel that they are misaligned with the position. Then they will be more likely to break away from the organization psychologically and behaviorally, that is, to perform job withdrawal behavior. Therefore, we propose:

Hypothesis 3: Person-job fit mediates the gap between actual work and significant others' work expectations and job withdrawal behavior.

2.4 The Moderating Role of External Employability

Employability, serving as a reflection of employee employability, has witnessed an extensive discussion among scholars. However, these studies have failed to provide a systematic definition of it. Rothwell and Arnold (2007) pointed out that Fugate's definition (2004) of employability ignored the antecedents of this variable. To this end, they regarded employability as an individual's ability to keep an existing job or obtain a desired one, and divided it into internal and external employability pursuant to a two-factor solution (Van der Heijden 2002). Specifically, internal employability refers to employment opportunities within an organization; while external employability denotes new employment possibilities available to individuals outside organizational boundaries (Cuyper and De Witte 2010; Rothwell and Arnold 2007).

Many studies regarded external employability perception as a positive concept. Considering Rothwell and Arnold's suggestion (2007) that the self-perceived scale can be used as two independent scales, we chose external employability as a moderator variable between person-job fit and job withdrawal behavior. It has been specifically argued that when external employability is high, employees with a low degree of person-job fit will perceive that they have more external employment opportunities. Besides, high external employability also reduces the risk of adverse consequences that job withdrawal bring to them, inducing them to perform withdrawal behaviors; when external employability is low, it means that employees lack other employment options. Therefore, in consideration of the bad consequences of job withdrawal behaviors, the possibility of their withdrawal behaviors will be low. That is, a low degree of person-job fit will lead to an increase in individual job withdrawal behavior, especially when external employability is strong. Therefore, we propose:

Hypothesis 4: External employability moderates the relationship between person-job fit and job withdrawal behavior.

2.5 Unmet Expectation and Job Withdrawal Behavior: A Moderated Mediation Model

Price (2001) stated that employees compare their current jobs with available jobs on the market. If the market has high availability of jobs better than their current job,

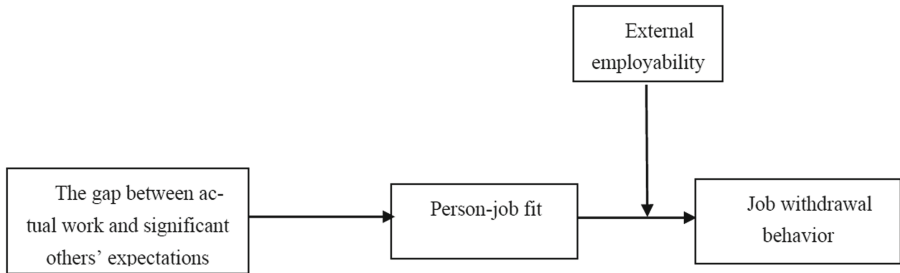


Fig. 1. The hypothesized model. (from author)

employees will be prone to lower job satisfaction and a higher turnover rate (Kwon 2020). We believe that external employability can be used as a moderating variable for the whole process. Employees who perceive high external employability think they have more opportunities. When they perceive the gap between actual work and significant others' work expectations, they will subscribe to a lower person-job fit, and will engage in more intense job withdrawal behaviors. However, employees with low external employability place a higher premium on job opportunities. Therefore, even if the gap between actual work and significant others' work expectations leads to the recognition of a low-level person-job fit, the individual will restrain himself from risk-aversion to reduce job withdrawal behavior relatively. Therefore, we propose:

Hypothesis 5: External employability moderates the mediating process between the actual work and significant others' work expectations through the person-job fit to employees' job withdrawal behavior, showing a moderated mediating effect.

The conceptual model tested in the current research is summarized in Fig. 1.

3 Methods

We distributed two questionnaires to 564 Chinese employees. The purpose and voluntary of the research were clearly described in the scale, and the respondents' right to fill it out anonymously was guaranteed. In the first survey (T1), employees were asked to fill in the gap between the actual work and significant others' expectations, external employability, and the control variables including the gap between actual work and self-expectation, age, and so on; in order to avoid common-method bias, we conducted a second survey three months later (T2), in which employees were asked to fill in the person-job fit and job withdrawal behavior scales. The two surveys finally received 482 valid questionnaires, with a recovery rate of 85.46%.

Of the 482 employees, 52.07% were female and 47.93% were male. The sample was dominated by new-generation employees, with 66.39% of employees between 20 and 35 years old; in terms of education level, masters and above accounted for 58.92%, while undergraduates accounted for 40.04%; in terms of working years, employees working "1–3 years" accounted for the highest proportion of 34.23%; ordinary employees and

R&D personnel accounted for the largest proportions in the job distribution, namely, 35.68% and 33.40% respectively.

3.1 Measures

We chose mature scales to measure all variables and translated them from English into Chinese with the advice of professional scholars. Except for the measurement of the gap between actual work and significant others' work expectations, all other variables were on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree).

The gap between actual work and significant others' work expectations. We used the work expectation disparity scale for 4 items, which was developed by Wang (2017) based on the job expectation consistency scale. The scale is a 6-point Likert scale, in which one of the items is "whether important family members like parents often feel that the job you are currently engaged in is not suitable for you" ($\alpha = 0.87$).

Person-job fit. We used the 5-item Person-Job Fit Scale developed by Lauver and Kristof-Brown (2001), one of which is "My abilities fit the demands of this job" ($\alpha = 0.89$).

External employability. We used the employee self-perceived employability scale (Rothwell and Arnold 2007), which was translated and revised by Zeng later (2011). Of these, 7 items were used to measure external employability, such as "The skills I have acquired from my current job can be used in other jobs outside the company" ($\alpha = 0.90$).

Job withdrawal behavior. We used the work withdrawal behavior scale developed by Lehman and Simpson (1992) with both psychological and physical dimensions. Considering the cumbersomeness of respondents' answering, we deleted similar items, leaving a total of 5 items, such as "Spent work time on personal matters" ($\alpha = 0.89$).

Control variables. We controlled for individual demographic variables, including gender (1 = male, 2 = female), age, education levels, working years and position. We also regarded the gap between actual work and self-expectation as a control variable to exclude its influence on job withdrawal behavior and measured it with the job expectation consistency scale (Feldman 1976). This scale has 4 items, one of which is "In some ways, I feel that my current job is not suitable for me" ($\alpha = 0.88$).

4 Results

4.1 Confirmatory Factor Analyses and Data Aggregation

Since all of our scales were drawn from the same source, to further test the validity of the conceptual model, we conducted confirmatory factor analyses of the gap between actual work and significant others' work expectations, person-job fit, external employability and job withdrawal behavior. Additionally, we compared the hypothesized four-factor model with a three-factor alternative model, in which the gap between actual work and others' expectations and person-job fit items were loaded onto one factor. Compared with the three-factor measurement model ($\chi^2 = 1089.39$, $df = 186$, CFI = 0.85, IFI = 0.85, RMSEA = 0.10, SRMR = 0.08), the results showed that the four-factor measurement model ($\chi^2 = 375.50$, $df = 183$, CFI = 0.97, IFI = 0.97, RMSEA = 0.05, SRMR = 0.04) fit the data better.

4.2 Hypothetical Testing

Means, standard deviations and intercorrelations among these variables are presented in Table 1. The results showed that the gap between actual work and significant others' work expectations was significantly positively correlated with job withdrawal behavior ($r = 0.58, p < 0.01$), which preliminary supported for Hypothesis 1; the person-job fit was significantly negatively correlated with job withdrawal ($r = -0.67, p < 0.01$).

Table 2 showed the unstandardized path modeling results. To test Hypothesis 1, we used demographic variables such as gender, age and self-expectation gaps as primary predictors, and the gap between actual work and significant others' work expectations as secondary predictors. Results showed that the gap between actual work and significant others' work expectations was positively related to job withdrawal behavior ($B = 0.35, p < 0.01$) and negatively related to person-job fit ($B = -0.23, p < 0.01$), which supported Hypotheses 1 and 2 respectively.

Hypothesis 3 predicted the mediating effect of person-job fit between the gap between actual work and significant others' work expectations and job withdrawal behavior. We derived the 95% CI of the indirect effects using a PROCESS macro (Preacher et al. 2007). The results showed that the indirect effect of the gap between actual work and significant other's work expectations on job withdrawal behavior through person-job fit was 0.10, with a 95% CI [0.29, 0.40]. In this regard, these findings supported Hypothesis 3.

Hypothesis 4 proposed that external employability positively moderates the relationship between person-job fit and job withdrawal. After controlling for demographic

Table 1. Means, Standard Deviations, and Intercorrelations Among Variables. (from author)

Variable name	MEAN	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1. Gender	1.53	0.50	1									
2. Age	1.98	0.85	-0.04	1								
3. Education level	3.58	0.52	0.01	0.45**	1							
4. Working years	2.91	1.13	0.02	0.49**	0.21**	1						
5. Position	3.64	2.23	-0.02	0.16**	0.19**	0.13**	1					
6. The gap between actual work and self-employment expectations	3.39	1.35	-0.04	0.02	-0.05	-0.01	0.03	1				
7. The gap between actual work and other people's work expectations	3.52	1.41	0.01	0.00	-0.03	-0.10**	0.06	0.29**	1			
8. External employability	3.30	1.00	0.02	-0.08	-0.02	-0.02	-0.02	0.26**	0.17**	1		
9. Person-job fit	3.23	1.05	0.03	0.13**	0.18***	0.20**	-0.01	-0.49**	-0.44**	-0.26**	1	
10. Withdrawal behavior	2.79	1.07	-0.02	-0.06	-0.05	-0.09	0.07	0.53**	0.58**	0.22**	-0.67**	1

Note N = 488 * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$

Table 2. Unstandardized Path Modeling Results. (from author)

Variables	Mediation model				Moderated mediation model			
	Person-job fit		Withdrawal behavior		Person-job fit		Withdrawal behavior	
	Estimate	SE	Estimate	SE	Estimate	SE	Estimate	SE
Intercept	3.81***	0.33	2.30***	0.31	3.81***	0.33	1.54***	0.48
Control variables								
Gender	0.03	0.08	0.00	0.06	0.03	0.08	0.02	0.06
Age	0.04	0.06	-0.08	0.05	0.04	0.06	-0.09	0.05
Education level	0.23	0.08	0.11	0.07	0.23	0.08	0.10	0.07
Working years	0.11	0.04	0.05	0.03	0.11	0.04	0.04	0.03
Position	-0.01	0.02	0.01	0.02	-0.01	0.02	0.01	0.01
The gap between actual work and self-employment expectations	-0.30***	0.03	0.18***	0.03	-0.30***	0.03	0.17***	0.03
Independent variables								
The gap between actual work and other people's work expectations	-0.23***	0.03	0.25***	0.03	-0.23***	0.03	0.24***	0.03
External employability							0.24***	0.12
Person-job fit × External employability							-0.08**	0.03
Mediator								
Person-job fit			-0.44***	0.04			-0.18***	0.02
R ²	0.38		0.59		0.38		0.59	

Note N = 488 * p < 0.05; ** p < 0.01, *** p < 0.01

variables, the interaction term between person-job fit and external employability was significant ($B = -0.13, p < 0.01$), supporting Hypothesis 4. The results of the simple slope analysis were shown in Fig. 2. When external employability was high (+1 SD), the relationship between person-job fit and job withdrawal behavior was stronger (simple slope = $-0.67, p < 0.01$) than low (-1SD) (simple slope = $-0.42, p < 0.01$). Therefore, the findings supported Hypothesis 4.

To examine moderated mediation, we used a PROCESS macro to estimate the indirect effect of the gap between actual work and significant others' work expectations on

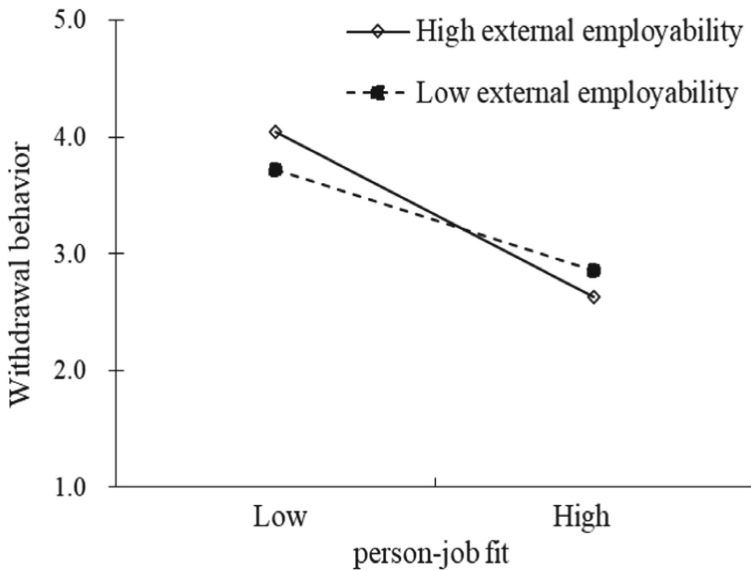


Fig. 2. The interaction between person-job fit and external employability on withdrawal behavior. (from author)

job withdrawal behavior through person-job fit at high and low levels of external employability. The results showed that the indirect effect was 0.02, with a 95% CI [0.0015, 0.04], and Hypothesis 5 was supported.

5 Discussion

This study investigated the impact of the gap between actual work and significant others' work expectations on employees' job withdrawal behavior in China. In the Chinese context, family, society, and organizations often endow individuals with higher role norms, which also make them more inclined to be influenced by important relationships or inclined to listen to their opinions. We adopted the perspective of the gap between actual work and significant others' work expectations innovatively (Wang and Yang 2017) and controlled the variable of the self-expectation gap to examine how Chinese employees behave in their workplace behaviors when they fail to meet other people's expectations. Overall, this is a cross-cutting study, and we found that the gap between actual and significant others' work expectations as a non-work factor positively predicts job withdrawal behaviors as employees move to the workplace.

Second, this study found that the above-mentioned mechanism can also be achieved through person-job fit, which provides new evidence for understanding how the gap in others' expectations of individuals affects their workplace behavior through work status. Since person-job fit emphasizes the matching of individual abilities and job demands (Han et al. 2019), we found that it can be affected by unmet expectations and can further predict job withdrawal behavior, which provided insights into how unmet expectation affects job withdrawal behavior.

Finally, we also discovered that external employability can act as a boundary condition for the above-mentioned influencing process. Specifically, high (rather than low) external employability enhances the effect of person-job fit on job withdrawal as well as the indirect effect of the gap between actual work and significant others' work expectations on workplace withdrawal. High external employability can serve as additional job security to boost employees' perception of environmental controllability, inducing them to pursue goals consistent with their expectations when the expectations of others are not met and person-job fit is low (Xu et al. 2016).

5.1 Practical Implications

From a practical point of view, this research has the following managerial implications: First, as the research of Rothwell and Arnold (2007) showed, those with high positions perceive themselves as more employable than those with low ones, suggesting that they also perceive higher external employability. Therefore, in light of the results of this study, we believe that when senior managers perceive a larger gap between actual work and significant others' expectations, they may be more likely to report lower person-job fit and more job withdrawal behavior than lower-level managers or employees. This requires that organizations place greater priority on narrowing unmet expectations of senior managers to reduce the occurrence of job withdrawal.

Second, many studies view employees' perceived external employability as a positive variable. This opinion approves that employees' perceived external employability can not only serve as an employee's personal resource but also an effective measure to reduce individual job insecurity and exhaustion (Berntson et al. 2010). However, the results of our study showed that when employees are poorly matched, their perceived high levels of external employability are more likely to increase their job withdrawal behavior than low levels of external employability. Thereafter, external employability becomes a threat to organizations.

Finally, the results of this study showed that there is an increased likelihood of job withdrawal behavior with a lower degree of person-job fit. However, Lauver and Kristof-Brown (2001) believed that the individual-organization fit had a stronger predictive effect on turnover intention than the person-job fit. This also has brought inspiration to managers. Because the first thing for an employee to perceive is the fit with the job, and then the fit with the organization. Therefore, managers should be mindful of inspecting employees' person-job fit timely and take measures before employees transform to lower organizational fit and perform job withdrawal behaviors.

5.2 Limitations and Future Research

Although this study provided innovative insights into predicting job withdrawal behavior in some respects, it has potential limitations: First, all our data were obtained through employee self-reporting, so the influence of common method bias could not be completely ruled out. Although confirmatory factor analysis demonstrated that our model has good construct validity, future studies should collect data through multiple approaches to reduce the risk of common method bias.

Second, although our findings demonstrated that the gap between actual work and significant others' work expectations can affect job withdrawal behavior through person-job fit, we cannot draw a causal relationship between these variables because of the use of a cross-sectional design. We encourage future research to test our model using experimental methods and longitudinal data.

Third, we specifically selected person-job fit as the mediating mechanism linking unmet expectations and job withdrawal behavior in this study. We also argued that the mediating effect of person-job fit is better than organizational commitment. However, we did not make specific comparison for the difference of the mediating effect between them in this research, so future research can consider testing this.

Finally, the samples selected for this study are targeted. China's strong collective concept provide constraints for individual behavior, especially close personalities may more easily influence their career judgments. Therefore, the relationships between the gap between actual work and significant others' work expectations, person-job fit, and job withdrawal behavior may be more significant than those from other cultures. To test the broad validity of this conclusion, future research will also need to investigate individuals across different countries and social settings.

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