

Measuring the impact of a psychological contract for health and safety

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Safe behaviour at work is a managerial challenge. Traditionally, research in the field of occupational health and safety has focussed on safety culture / safety climate to explain risk-taking and safety behaviours. Managers in high hazard industries have thus focussed their resources on creating and sustaining positive safety cultures / climates. Recently, Dr. Calvin Burns of the Department of Human Resource Management, University of Strathclyde, has proposed that a “psychological contract for health and safety” may offer alternative explanations for individual risk-taking and safety behaviours at work. Drawing on the growing psychological contract, trust, and organisational safety literatures, Dr. Burns has developed and tested a questionnaire instrument which offers unique insights into this largely overlooked area of the employment relationship.

The psychological contract has been used to explain general areas of the employment relationship and has been investigated by examining the fulfilment of promises or obligations from both employees’ and employers’ perspectives. Dr. Burns conceptualised an employee’s psychological contract for health and safety as perceptions and expectations about the employers’ health and safety obligations and promises, and the extent to which these are perceived to have been fulfilled. It should be noted that by their very nature, psychological contracts are idiosyncratic and that different occupational groups (if not different individuals within the same occupational group) may experience different perceived obligations / promises about health and safety from the same employer. Thus, organisational and occupational contexts need to be considered

carefully when researching the psychological contract for health and safety. The context for the current study was the healthcare sector. Employees from two high hazard services within the same NHS organisation were recruited to take part in this study.

The purpose of the current study was to develop and test a psychological contract measure for health and safety. Dr. Burns proposed that employees with a positive psychological contract for health and safety would trust their line managers more with respect to health and safety, would perceive a more positive safety climate (i.e. would have more positive attitudes and perceptions about what their line managers regularly say and do about health and safety), and be less likely to have experienced a near-miss or incident at work, than employees with a more negative psychological contract for health and safety.

The questionnaire results revealed that participants had high expectations of what their employer was obliged to provide them with / promised them, with respect to health and safety, most notably “training about the risks in their jobs”, “personal protective equipment”, and an “incident reporting system.” Participants perceived the highest fulfilment with respect to “incident reporting” and the lowest fulfilment with respect to “participation in making health and safety rules / policy.” On average, participants perceived a slight breach in their psychological contracts for health and safety (i.e. perceived obligations / promises were perceived to be slightly unfulfilled) and the greatest breach was with respect to “investigation and follow-up measures after accidents and injuries have taken place.”

Dr. Burns found evidence to support his proposed model in that correlational analyses revealed significant positive relationships between the psychological contract for health and safety, trust and safety climate measures. This research suggests that line managers play a central role in employees' psychological contracts for health and safety. In order to ensure that employees develop appropriate expectations about health and safety, line managers should be involved in the development of organisational health and safety policies and procedures, so that they will better be able to live up to the employees' expectations that result from these documents. Similarly, line managers should play a central role in the health and safety induction of new employees. Dr. Burns is continuing to collect data in order to validate his model in terms of organisational safety outcomes.