Chapter 2
Is Updating Play or Work?
The Mediating Role of Updating Orientation in Linking Threat of Professional Obsolescence to Turnover/Turnaway Intentions

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ABSTRACT
This study proposes that IT professionals’ behavioral orientation towards IT knowledge and skills updating demands can take on two contrasting forms: updating-as-play or updating-as-work. Drawing on threat-rigidity theory (Staw, Sandelands, & Dutton, 1981), the authors hypothesize that IT professionals who feel threatened by professional obsolescence are more likely to approach updating-as-work more than as play. Results from a sample of IT professionals are consistent with threat-rigidity theory (Staw et al., 1981) in that the threat of professional obsolescence is negatively related to updating-as-play and is positively related to updating-as-work. The authors also find that updating-as-play is negatively related to turnaway intentions and that updating-as-work is positively related to turnover intentions; these findings are consistent with IT theories of job mobility. The authors conclude this study with a discussion of these results and propose future research directions.

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INTRODUCTION

The threat of professional obsolescence remains an endemic challenge for IT professionals (Lee, Trauth, & Farwell, 1995; Nelson, 1991; Tsai, Compeau, & Haggerty, 2007). Unlike in other professions where knowledge and skills erode more slowly, the half-life of knowledge and skills in the IT profession is estimated at about two years (Ang & Slaughter, 2000; Dubin, 1990). The IT professional is therefore subjected to a continuous threat of professional obsolescence (Tsai et al., 2007), and must update their knowledge and skills continuously to remain productive in the IT profession. Otherwise, their IT careers may stagnate, or even decline, in terms of employability, promotability, and compensation.

Despite the importance of updating behaviors associated with the IT profession, limited theoretical and empirical research exists on updating behaviors – be it its ontology, etiology, structure, or consequences. Hence, we begin a program of research by asking: how do IT professionals perceive and approach updating?

We draw on the concept of play (Mainemelis & Ronson, 2006) to propose two distinct behavioral orientations towards updating: “updating-as-play” and “updating-as-work.” We examine how each updating orientation is affected by the threat of professional obsolescence and how it subsequently affects job mobility intentions. In doing so, this study responds to a recent call by Joseph, Ng, Koh, and Ang (2007, p. 555) to examine antecedents of job mobility that are particularly germane to the IT discipline. As noted by Joseph et al. (2007), prior IT research on the job mobility intentions are limited in their contributions as the antecedents examined are similar to those that have been identified in the general organizational behavior literature. Therefore, this study contributes to the IT discipline by proposing that updating orientation is associated with job mobility intentions of IT professionals. The study also contributes to existing theory on updating by examining the consequences of updating orientation on job mobility intentions.

THEORETICAL FOUNDATION AND HYPOTHESES DEVELOPMENT

Figure 1 presents the research model governing this study. It shows the hypotheses and the systems of relationships among the hypotheses.

Threat of Professional Obsolescence and Updating Orientations

Professional obsolescence is defined as the erosion of professional knowledge and skills required for successful performance (e.g., Dubin, 1990; Ferdinand, 1966; Glass, 2000). To manage the threat of professional obsolescence, IT professionals are constantly required to learn and stay up-to-date with the latest technologies in the IT field (Tsai et al., 2007). How IT professionals view and approach updating is not well-understood. To address this gap, we draw on the concept of play orientation (Mainemelis & Ronson, 2006) to propose two distinct ways by which IT professionals approach updating: updating-as-play or updating-as-work.

Mainemelis and Ronson (2006, p. 85) define play as “a patterned behavioral orientation” (p. 85) towards performing any type of activity. A play orientation is characterized by five interdependent elements: positive affect; loose and flexible association between means and ends; freedom from external constraints; non-institutionalized boundaries of time and space; and a threshold experience. Updating-as-play is also expressive in nature in that updating is perceived as intrinsically rewarding. Because updating is seen as play with highly positive emotions such as “fun, relaxation, ecstatic joy, or emotional relief” (Mainemelis & Ronson, 2006, p. 91) updating is pursued as a goal.
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