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When does adaptive performance lead to higher task performance?

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Summary

Adaptive performance is a facet of performance that reflects acquiring enhanced competencies in response to change. Micro-level researchers have assumed that adaptive performance is beneficial for task performance. Similarly, macro-level researchers have suggested that organizations need to attend to, monitor, and respond to contingencies in their environments for adaptive performance to be beneficial for firm performance. Drawing from the attention-based theory of the firm and resource theory, we suggest that perceptions of organizational politics and individual differences in conscientiousness constitute contingencies of the adaptive performance–task performance relationship. In a sample of 92 call center employees, we found that adaptive performance is positively associated with task performance but that conscientiousness and organizational politics jointly influence the adaptive performance–task performance relationship. Copyright © 2011 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

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When Does Adaptive Performance Yield Higher Overall Job Performance?

Tighter economic resources and greater worldwide competition require organizations to be increasingly flexible, efficient, and innovative to survive (Cascio, 2003; Ployhart & Bliese, 2006). Such efforts require a workforce that effectively adapts to change (Kozlowski, Watola, Nowakowski, Kim, & Botero, 2008). Adaptive performance is a facet of job performance that reflects such effectiveness. Specifically, it consists of acquiring enhanced competencies in response to changing job requirements (B. Griffin & Hesketh, 2003; LePine, Colquitt, & Erez, 2000). Individual-level adaptive performance facilitates organizational outcomes with regard to the following: (i) managing change; (ii) organizational learning; and (iii) keeping up with changing customer expectations (Dorsey, Cortina, & Luchman, 2010). Surprisingly, micro-level scholars have only recently begun to investigate adaptive performance. Although research has primarily focused on predictors, an often-stated impetus for research on adaptive performance is the yet untested assumption that it is beneficial for task performance.

Macro-level scholars have long been interested in how firms adapt to changes in demands from their external environments and how such adaptation translates to firm-level performance. Contingency theorists have argued for the need to fit a firm's strategy, culture, and structure with the external environment (Hofer, 1975; Leiblein, 2003). Researchers from the dynamic capabilities perspective have suggested that competitive advantage comes from firms' ability to develop processes that help them sense opportunities and threats in the environment and

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respond in a timely manner (Eisenhardt & Martin, 2000; Teece, Pisano, & Schuen, 1997). Organizational-learning researchers have argued that the ability to learn is the ultimate capability that firms require to adapt and renew themselves (Crossan, Lane, & White, 1999). Finally, advocates of the attention-based view of the firm have suggested that the effectiveness of the firm's adaptive efforts depends on the acquisition, understanding, and communication of relevant information regarding demands of the environment (Ocasio, 1997; Ocasio & Joseph, 2005). Common to these approaches is the notion that firms need to continually attend to their environment and assess the conditions under which change is needed. We suggest that parallels exist between an organization's efforts to adapt and an individual's efforts to adapt, such that macro-level work on the contingencies between adaptation and firm performance provides a useful analogy for understanding when individual-level adaptive performance is likely to positively affect task performance.

The attention-based view of the firm may be particularly relevant in bridging macro and micro views of how and when entities translate adaptive behavior into favorable outcomes (i.e., task performance at the individual level and financial performance at the firm level). Attention, although an individual-level construct, has played a central role in a macro-level theory on firm adaptation. Recognizing that managers are selective in attending to aspects of the environment because they are confronted with more information than they can handle (Cyert & March, 1963; March & Simon, 1958; Mintzberg, 1973), Ocasio (1997) emphasized the roles of attention and communication processes as factors determining the effectiveness of organizational adaptation efforts.

We consider the perspective of the attention-based view of the firm and apply resource theory (e.g., Hobfoll, 1989; Kahneman, 1973; Kanfer & Ackerman, 1989) to highlight the critical role of attention in individual adaptation and to identify and empirically examine contingencies of the adaptive performance–task performance relationship. In bridging macro and micro views of adaptation, we seek to contribute to the field by advancing a theory at one level by considering insights and findings from the other.

Adaptive Performance

Scholars have defined job performance as behaviors that have implications for organizational effectiveness (Campbell, McCloy, Oppler, & Sager, 1993). There are four facets of performance—task performance, contextual performance or organizational citizenship behavior, counterproductive work behavior, and withdrawal behavior. Whereas task performance refers to behaviors explicitly mentioned in the job description, contextual performance refers to behaviors that “support the organizational, social, and psychological environment in which the technical core must function” (Borman & Motowidlo, 1997, p. 73). In contrast, counterproductive work behaviors involve actions done with the intent to harm the organization or individuals within it (Sackett & DeVore, 2001). Although sometimes included in discussions of counterproductive work behavior, withdrawal behavior refers to tardiness, absenteeism, and voluntary turnover (Johns, 2002).

Scholars have argued that this classification of performance behaviors reflects a static view of performance and have called for a focus on behaviors that reflect the extent to which individuals are responsive to *changes* in task requirements and in their work environments (Allworth & Hesketh, 1999; Campbell, 1999; M. Griffin, Neal, & Parker, 2007; Hesketh & Neal, 1999). Labeled as adaptive performance, such behaviors reflect altering and applying competencies in response to either anticipated or current change. We emphasize that adaptive performance encompasses a set of behaviors rather than ability or intent.

Pulakos, Arad, Donovan, and Plamondon (2000) suggested that adaptive performance requirements of jobs can be subdivided into eight categories of behavior: handling emergencies or crisis situations; handling work stress; solving problems creatively; dealing with uncertain and unpredictable work situations; learning work tasks, technologies, and procedures; demonstrating interpersonal adaptability; demonstrating cultural adaptability; and demonstrating physically oriented adaptability. They found support for these eight categories of behaviors through (i) content analysis of critical incident reports; and (ii) exploratory and confirmatory factor analyses of criticality reports, wherein

incumbents indicated the importance and the frequency of behaviors that were generated from critical incident reports and definitions of the proposed dimensions. However, when Pulakos et al. (2002) asked supervisors to rate employees' adaptive performance using similar items, they found that a single factor best fit the data. The approach of Pulakos et al. (2000) to defining adaptive performance is not without its critics. Johnson (2001, 2003) argued that dealing effectively with unpredictable and changing work situations and learning new tasks, technologies, and procedures uniquely reflects adaptive performance, as opposed to task performance or citizenship behaviors (see also Ployhart & Bliese, 2006).

Subsequently, researchers have conceptualized adaptive performance as a unidimensional construct, but one that encompasses adaptation to changes occurring at the task, team, and organizational levels (e.g., M. Griffin et al., 2007; M. Griffin, Parker, & Mason, 2010). For example, adjusting to new work procedures reflects adaptation at the task level; taking on a new role in response to changes in team composition or processes reflects adaptation at the team level; and acquiring information to adapt to changes in the organization reflects adaptation at the organization level. Most research on adaptive performance has focused on task-level adaptive performance (e.g., M. Griffin et al., 2010; Lang & Bliese, 2009; LePine et al., 2000), as we do here.

Is adaptive performance different from other facets of performance? We emphasize that adaptive performance reflects behaviors associated with competency *acquisition*. In contrast, task and contextual performances reflect behaviors associated with the *expression* of competencies. Dorsey et al. (2010, p. 465) noted that "although some aspects of adaptability may look similar to routine technical performance, adaptation may involve doing the same activity to a greater degree, with greater intensity, or in a substantially different way." Allworth and Hesketh (1999) found that items assessing adaptive performance, task performance, and organizational citizenship behaviors loaded on three separate factors. Additionally, researchers have distinguished adaptive performance from related constructs, such as proactive behavior (M. Griffin et al., 2007; M. Griffin et al., 2010). The key difference between these sets of behaviors is the locus of change. Adaptive performance reflects a response to externally initiated changes (e.g., adapting to new role requirements resulting from organizational change). In contrast, proactive performance reflects employee efforts to change the environment (e.g., developing a more efficient work system). Through confirmatory factor analysis, M. Griffin et al. (2007) found that task, adaptive, and proactive performances loaded on separate factors in two samples of employees and in one sample of supervisors. Similarly, M. Griffin et al. (2010) found a little overlap in self-ratings of these constructs.

Adaptive Performance–Task Performance Relationship

A basic premise underlying strategic management theories is that adapting to external contingencies in the business environment is a necessary condition for achieving sustained firm-level performance (e.g., Barreto, 2010; Leiblein, 2003; Venkatraman, 1989). A similar argument can be made at the individual level. Other things being equal, readily accepting change and making an effort to gain the additional competencies needed to implement strategy-relevant changes are likely to yield enhanced performance capability and career success (M. Griffin et al., 2007; Oreg, 2003). For example, a salesperson who takes extra time to learn about a new product is likely to achieve higher sales of this new product than if he or she had not developed this new knowledge.

Hypothesis 1: Adaptive performance is positively related to task performance.

Contingencies of the Adaptive Performance–Task Performance Relationship

Not all adaptive efforts are successful (Armenakis & Bedeian, 1999). Zajac, Kraatz, and Bresser (2000) found that adaptive efforts at the organizational level enhance firm performance to the extent to which they align a company's

strategy with what is needed to be successful. That is, they found that not only insufficient efforts to adapt but also excessive or misdirected change inhibit firm-level performance. We argue that misdirected change also inhibits individual-level performance. For example, at the beginning of the model year, retail-car salespeople who develop detailed knowledge of low-profit, small-volume vehicles are likely to be less effective than those who develop expertise on the high-profit, medium-volume vehicles that senior managers want pushed on the sales floor. In the case of the former, adaptive performance is likely to yield low levels of task performance because the salespeople have insufficient knowledge of the models favored by management and/or may unconsciously focus on selling the models that they know best.

A key condition for successful change is the ability to attend to and accurately interpret the environment (Teece et al., 1997). Ocasio (1997) argued that attention (i) encompasses the noticing, encoding, interpreting, and focusing of time and effort by organizational decision makers on issues and answers; and (ii) is intrinsically linked to the immediate context in which cognition and action are situated. Micro-level researchers have also emphasized the importance of attention as a key resource for individual job performance. Although some debate exists (Duncan, 2000), resource theorists (Kahneman, 1973; Kanfer & Ackerman, 1989) have generally concluded that individuals have a finite pool of attentional resources. Both stress and leadership theorists have suggested that deploying one's attentional resources to one activity necessarily precludes these resources from being devoted elsewhere (Fiedler & Garcia, 1987; Hobfoll, 1989; Jex, 1998). Building on this research, we link macro and micro works by focusing on the allocation of attention as a key resource for adaptation and change. Just as the collective managers of organizations need to attend to, monitor, and respond to contingencies in their environments for adaptive performance to be beneficial (Teece, 2007), an individual's adaptive performance will yield higher task performance only when he or she has attentional resources able to be deployed to accurately recognize adaptation opportunities, determine the appropriate behavioral changes, and gain the necessary competencies to adapt.

In developing our hypotheses, we build on the principle of attention as situated. In other words, we agree with the idea in both macro and micro organizational science literatures that what decision makers focus on, and what they do, depends both on their characteristics and on the particular context in which they work. Accordingly, we focus on both individual-level and situation-level contingency factors. Following March and Simon's (1958) emphasis on limited attentional capabilities, we propose that individual differences in conscientiousness determine how effectively individuals allocate their attentional resources. Furthermore, given the role of the social and economic structures of the organization, including policies, work roles, social relationships, and political networks, in directing attention (Ocasio & Joseph, 2005), we argue that high levels of organizational politics distract attention and impact the extent to which an enhanced capability to allocate resources, in this case attention, is needed to be successful (Witt, Kacmar, Carlson, & Zivnuska, 2002). Accordingly, we propose that conscientiousness and organizational politics jointly influence the relationship between individual adaptive performance and task performance.

Conscientiousness and organizational politics as moderators

Individuals high in conscientiousness tend to be detail oriented, highly organized, and determined to achieve (McCrae & John, 1992). Conscientiousness is associated with effective and directed use of one's informational processing and attentional resources (Derryberry, Reed, & Pilkenton-Taylor, 2003). Not surprisingly, workers high in conscientiousness tend to be more successful in problem-solving efforts than those low in conscientiousness because they devote more attentional resources to identifying problems and generating solutions. These individuals also attend closely to information from reputed sources, even if doing so requires additional effort and persistence (Heinström, 2003).

Increased propensities for diligence and awareness are likely especially important in situations marked by uncertainty and ambiguous expectations, as are environments characterized by high levels of organizational politics

(Hochwarter, Witt, & Kacmar, 2000; Witt et al., 2002). Highly political environments are marked by uncertainty about the nature of organizational decisions, processes, and/or roles, leading individuals to engage in divisive and sometimes manipulative behaviors in their own self-interest. Organizational politics can be considered counterproductive in the sense that political environments may distract attentional resources away from tasks as individuals try to figure out what is expected of them (Harris, Harris, & Harvey, 2007). Cognitive load theorists suggest that trying to process multiple distinct components of one's environment can create a cognitive overload and distract attentional resources away from determining and focusing on the key aspects of a task, especially if the task involves complex learning (van Merriënboer & Sweller, 2005). Thus, from a resource allocation framework, high levels of organizational politics not only distract an effective resource allocation but also require more attentional resources to determine how to interpret information and allocate resources. In the succeeding paragraphs, we offer a discussion of how high and low levels of organizational politics and conscientiousness are likely to affect the relationship between adaptive performance and task performance.

Low organizational politics, high conscientiousness

When organizational politics is low, requirements for successful performance are relatively clear. Given their enhanced capability to utilize their attentional resources, individuals high in conscientiousness are likely to be effective in determining how to focus their adaptive performance behaviors (e.g., selecting the appropriate competencies to acquire) to improve their task performance. Therefore, we expected a positive relationship between adaptive performance and task performance among workers high in conscientiousness perceiving low levels of organizational politics.

Low organizational politics, low conscientiousness

In low-politics environments, individuals do not have to utilize considerable cognitive resources to determine how to apply their adaptive performance efforts. Therefore, increased efforts at adaptive performance likely result in higher levels of task performance for employees low in conscientiousness as well as for employees high in conscientiousness. Therefore, we expected a positive relationship between adaptive performance and task performance among workers low in conscientiousness perceiving low levels of organizational politics.

High organizational politics, high conscientiousness

Workers high in conscientiousness are likely to effectively navigate highly political environments. Despite the ambiguity in expectations, these individuals are likely able to effectively utilize their attentional resources to discovering areas where task performance can be improved by engaging in adaptive performance behaviors. Therefore, we expected a positive relationship between adaptive performance and task performance among workers high in conscientiousness perceiving high levels of organizational politics.

High organizational politics, low conscientiousness

Highly political environments likely overwhelm the attentional resources of those low in conscientiousness. These individuals tend to not pay attention to details and are not dedicated to high achievement goals. Therefore, these individuals are unlikely to effectively translate adaptive performance efforts into task performance. Therefore, we expected a weak relationship between adaptive performance and task performance among workers low in conscientiousness perceiving high levels of organizational politics.

Hypothesis 2: Adaptive performance, conscientiousness, and organizational politics interact to predict task performance. The relationship between adaptive performance and task performance is weakest among low-conscientiousness workers who report high levels of organizational politics.

Method

Participants and procedure

We collected data from 92 of 134 (68.6 per cent) call center employees (67.4 per cent were women, M age = 29.17, M tenure = 3.38 years) of a financial services organization. We asked the employees to complete measures of organizational politics and personality. We asked each employee's respective supervisor ($N = 24$ supervisors) to provide ratings of adaptive performance. Additionally, a single quality control supervisor provided task performance ratings for all of the employees.

Research context

We examined our hypotheses in a sample of call center employees. This sample allowed us to attain independent ratings of adaptive performance and task performance. The direct supervisor rated an employee's level of adaptive performance. A separate quality control supervisor provided ratings of the employee's task performance. Using separate raters for the performance dimensions is particularly important for minimizing rater biases that might distort the effects (Borman & Motowidlo, 1997; Morgeson & Campion, 1997).

Call centers provide an interesting context in which to study adaptive performance. In a sense, call center employees serve two bosses, their actual supervisor and the customer. Although pleasing one's boss by hitting productivity goals (e.g., talk-time goals) is important, being effective with customers is tantamount to performing one's job requirements effectively. As customer demands are increasingly sophisticated, ongoing efforts to acquire customer service skills are important task performance over the long term.

At the time we collected the data, the financial services organization was facing competitive pressures that led to senior management decisions aimed to simultaneously reduce costs and increase revenue. For the call center employees, this meant changing requirements; specifically, they were directed to shorten talk times (i.e., so that fewer employees were needed to handle the call volume), reduce discretionary fee exemptions (i.e., to increase revenue), and increase cross-selling efforts (i.e., to increase revenue). These directives required that the employees acquire increased product knowledge for the cross-selling while learning and implementing changing scripts for customer transactions. Critical to task performance was the effectiveness in applying the acquired knowledge (e.g., knowledge of changes in processes and customer interaction protocol) consistent with the parameters of the customer interaction (i.e., customer personality, customer demands, etc.). Whereas some call center workers are consistent in effectively applying their acquired knowledge across very different customer interactions, others are not. For example, if employees lack clarity with regard to the most appropriate way to allocate their time/energy, they may focus on adapting to actual or anticipated changes that will not impact their task performance, such as developing knowledge of a product that will be sold in retail outlets but not through the call center. Moreover, some workers who have acquired new competencies but work in a political environment may continue to follow old protocol out of fear for the consequences of changing behavior that heretofore made them successful.

Measures

Organizational politics

The participants completed the Going Along to Get Ahead subscale of the Kacmar and Ferris (1991) Perceptions of Organizational Politics Scale ($\alpha = .69$). An example item is "Agreeing with powerful others is the best alternative in this organization." Participants responded to this 4-item measure using a 5-point Likert scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 5 = *strongly agree*). Although the alpha for this item is somewhat low, it is consistent with other studies that have

used this measure (e.g., Gibney, Zagencsyk, & Masters, 2009) and may result from the fact that the items tap into slightly different aspects of the construct (Miller, Byrne, Rutherford, & Hansen, 2009; see John & Benet-Martínez, 2000 for a review of the bandwidth–fidelity trade-off).

Personality

The participants responded to the Personal Characteristics Inventory (PCI; Barrick & Mount, 1993). The PCI was specifically developed to assess normal personality in workplace settings. The 30-item conscientiousness scale was assessed using a 3-point scale (1 = *agree*, 2 = *neither agree nor disagree*, 3 = *disagree*). We also used the 30-item extroversion and emotional stability scales and 20-item agreeableness and openness to experience scales. The PCI is widely accepted in research on personality and has demonstrated internal consistencies and criterion-related validity similar to that of the NEO personality inventory (Barrick, Mount, & Strauss, 1993).

Adaptive performance

We are unaware of a widely accepted measure of adaptive performance. Authors have used their own measures of the construct, and many studies have been conducted using laboratory simulations (e.g., M. Griffin et al., 2010; B. Griffin & Hesketh, 2003; LePine et al., 2000; Pulakos et al., 2002). Items based on the proposed dimensions of Pulakos et al. (2000) have been criticized for being relatively specific to certain jobs over others and for including items that are more appropriately characterized as other aspects of performance (M. Griffin et al., 2007; B. Griffin & Hesketh, 2003; Johnson, 2001). In contrast, the 3-item measure by M. Griffin et al. (2007) assessing adaptive performance with regard to task behaviors is more general (e.g., “Adapted well to changes in core tasks”) and has shown discriminant validity with task and proactive performance. However, prior research also has emphasized that adaptive performance items need to be relevant to the particular context in which adaptive performance is being investigated, especially in light of the fact that adaptive performance items appear to load on one unidimensional factor (B. Griffin & Hesketh, 2003; Pulakos et al., 2002). Therefore, in this study, we used a 4-item measure of adaptive performance that closely aligned with the items used by M. Griffin et al. (2007) but were context relevant enough so that supervisors could understand and meaningfully rate their subordinates. An example item is *Adapts readily to changing rules or requirements*. Employee’s supervisors completed this measure of adaptive performance ($\alpha = .86$). The supervisors used a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (*weak*, or bottom 10 per cent) to 5 (*best*, or top 10 per cent) to make their ratings.

Task performance

A quality control supervisor computed a proprietary annual quality rating for each employee on the basis of call monitoring. This proprietary rating was based on several call monitor ratings recorded over the previous year and took into account the extent to which the employee was compliant with the organization’s performance standards, including providing the appropriate level of emotional empathy to customers and satisfactorily responding to customer needs while maintaining standards of efficiency.

Results

We present the scale intercorrelations in Table 1.¹ Prior to conducting the analyses, we centered all predictors at their respective means. We used hierarchical linear regression to test our hypotheses. In the first step, we entered conscientiousness, adaptive performance, and organizational politics. In the second step, we entered the 3 two-way interactions. In the third step, we entered the three-way interaction between conscientiousness, adaptive performance, and organizational politics.

¹We include correlations for all five of the Big Five factors as well as general mental ability.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics and scale intercorrelations.

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1. Task performance	3.36	0.57	–								
2. Conscientiousness	2.65	0.23	.12	(.77)							
3. Adaptive performance	3.32	0.78	.28**	.25*	(.86)						
4. Organizational politics	2.64	0.60	.06	–.40**	–.16	(.69)					
5. General mental ability	25.58	5.04	.04	.02	.19	–.07	–				
6. Agreeableness	2.62	0.32	–.07	.31**	.09	–.27*	–.04	(.80)			
7. Emotional stability	1.60	0.25	.03	.48**	.18	–.41**	.06	.23*	(.81)		
8. Extroversion	2.28	0.40	–.12	.10	.07	–.14	–.08	.23*	.34**	(.88)	
9. Openness to experience	2.50	0.34	–.04	.15	.25*	–.18	.29**	.13	.33**	.43**	(.82)

Note: * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$. Alpha coefficients are displayed in the diagonal. The correlations between general mental ability and the other variables are based on an N of 77.

We present the results of our analyses in Table 2. As shown there and consistent with our first hypothesis, adaptive performance was significantly associated with task performance at Step 1 ($\beta = .28$, $p < .01$). At Step 2, adaptive performance was again significant ($\beta = .29$, $p < .01$), but the respective two-way interactions were not. At Step 3, both adaptive performance ($\beta = .45$, $p < .01$) and the Conscientiousness \times Adaptive performance \times Organizational politics cross-product term were significant ($\beta = .34$, $p < .01$, $\Delta R^2 = 0.05$).²

To explore the nature of this interaction, we plotted the relationship between adaptive performance and task performance at two levels of conscientiousness (± 1 *SD*) and organizational politics (± 1 *SD*) and performed simple slopes analyses (Preacher, Curran, & Bauer, 2006). We present the results of the simple slopes analyses in Table 3 and the corresponding plot of the interaction in Figure 1. As expected, the relationship between adaptive performance and task performance was positive ($\beta = .79$, $p < .01$) among employees low in conscientiousness reporting low levels of organizational politics. As expected, the relationship between adaptive performance and task performance among employees low in conscientiousness reporting high levels of organizational politics was not significant ($\beta = .18$, *ns*). Also as expected, the relationship between adaptive performance and task performance was positive ($\beta = .63$, $p < .05$) among employees high in conscientiousness reporting high perceptions of politics. Unexpectedly, the relationship between adaptive performance and task performance among employees high in conscientiousness reporting low levels of politics was not significant ($\beta = .17$, *ns*).

Discussion

Adaptive performance reflects efforts to gain new competencies in response to change. Although the study of adaptive performance is relatively new in the micro literature, macro-level researchers have a long history of studying firm-level adaptive efforts. Macro-level scholars have suggested that efforts to adapt generally have positive implications for firm performance; however, this effect may be enhanced or diminished depending on the extent to which decision makers have attentional resources to recognize important contingencies in their environment (Teece, 2007).

²An anonymous reviewer raised the important issue that adaptive performance may simply be the manifestation of general mental ability and that general mental ability might account for the relationship between adaptive performance and task performance. To investigate this possibility, we included general mental ability (measured by the Wonderlic Personnel Test) in supplementary analyses, as we were able to access that data for 77 of the 92 employees in the sample. Adding general mental ability as a control variable did not reduce the significance of the three-way interaction effect. Further, adaptive performance predicted task performance over and above the variance accounted for by general mental ability and the other predictors. Finally, the three-way interaction effect was not significant when we substituted general mental ability for adaptive performance.

Table 2. Hierarchical regression results.

	Step 1	Step 2	Step 3
Conscientiousness (C)	.11	.08	.11
Adaptive performance (AP)	.28**	.29**	.45**
Organizational politics (OP)	.15	.16	.13
C*AP		.03	-.05
C*OP		-.14	-.04
AP*OP		.15	.20
C*AP*OP			.34*
R ²	.10*	.13	.18*
ΔR ²		.03	.05*

Note: * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$. Standardized coefficients are presented.

Table 3. Simple slopes analyses.

	β	SE	t -test ($df = 84$)	p -value
<i>Low organizational politics</i>				
Low conscientiousness	.79	0.29	2.73	.01
High conscientiousness	.17	0.20	0.84	.41
<i>High organizational politics</i>				
Low conscientiousness	.18	0.14	1.28	.21
High conscientiousness	.63	0.31	2.05	.04

SE, standard error.

In contrast, micro-level scholars have assumed that adaptive performance is beneficial for task performance. Recently, however, Dorsey et al. (2010) called for this relationship to be tested. Like organizational decision makers, employees have a limited pool of attentional resources (e.g., Hobfoll, 1989). Thus, drawing from the attention-based view of the firm and resource theory, we suggested that individual and situational factors that facilitate or hinder the effective allocation of attentional resources reflect contingencies of the adaptive performance–task performance relationship.

This study provided us with a unique opportunity to use research and theory at the macro-level to inform research at the micro-level. Although these two management perspectives have traditionally been considered separately, a number of constructs, such as adaptive performance, overlap. We found support for the idea that adaptive

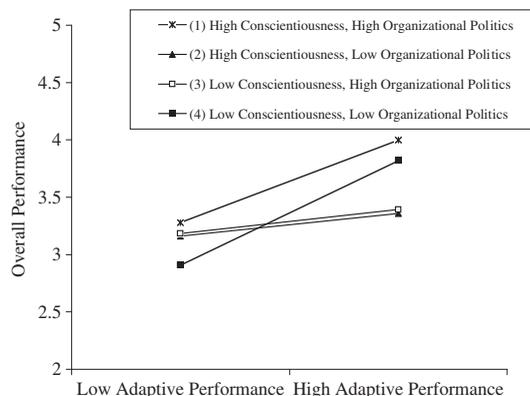


Figure 1. Interaction between adaptive performance, conscientiousness, and organizational politics predicting task performance

performance does not necessarily have a perfect correspondence with task performance. As hypothesized, our results indicate that although adaptive performance is related to task performance, this relationship is moderated by both conscientiousness and perceptions of organizational politics.

As expected, we found a positive relationship between adaptive performance and task performance among employees high in conscientiousness reporting high levels of organizational politics. This is in line with prior research suggesting that organizational politics determines the importance of conscientiousness for performance (Witt et al., 2002). In terms of resource theory, we suggested that the translation of adaptive performance to task performance relies on an individual's capability to effectively allocate attentional resources. When organizational politics is high, expectations are unclear, and conscientiousness is needed to help effectively employ resources. Also as expected, we also found a non-significant relationship between adaptive performance and task performance among employees low in conscientiousness reporting high levels of organizational politics. Being low in conscientiousness, these employees lack the ability to determine where to focus their adaptive efforts in an unclear environment.

However, when organizational politics is low, expectations and requirements for success are relatively clear. As expected, we found a positive association between adaptive performance and task performance among employees low in conscientiousness reporting low levels of organizational politics. When trying to navigate political environments that do not distract attention, high levels of conscientiousness may not be required for efforts at adaptive performance to translate into higher task performance.

Unexpectedly, we did not find a significant relationship between adaptive performance and task performance among employees high in conscientiousness reporting low levels of organizational politics. In environments with low organizational politics, efforts to determine requirements to be successful do not distract attentional resources. Although this result was unexpected, research on adaptive performance may offer some explanation. Highly conscientious individuals can rigidly adhere to their initial way of approaching a problem without reevaluating and changing to be more effective (LePine et al., 2000). Therefore, by not having their attentional resources distracted, those high in conscientiousness may actually become their own stumbling blocks. A qualitative study may be useful in investigating the performance of high-conscientiousness individuals reporting low levels of organizational politics.

Theoretical implications and future research directions

With this study, we aimed to bridge macro and micro discussions of adaptive performance. In doing so, we attempted to expand current thinking about individual-level adaptive performance by viewing adaptive performance as a predictor. Scholars have encouraged researchers to consider outcomes of different performance dimensions (e.g., Binning & Barrett, 1989). We not only consider task performance as an outcome of adaptive performance but also elucidate the conditions that affect the strength of this relationship. Further, we emphasize a dynamic view of employee behavior. The organizational change literature suggests that organizations undergo cycles of change and stability (Miller & Chen, 1994; Rumelt, 1995), mirroring Lewin's (1958) unfreezing, changing, and refreezing approach to change management (see also Tetenbaum, 1998). When task requirements change, adaptive performance is necessary for employees to have high task performance at the refreezing stage. Our results suggest that personality and environment jointly influence the strength of the adaptive performance–task performance relationship.

Adaptive performance is not the only dimension of performance thought to have positive consequences for task performance. Researchers have suggested that organizational citizenship behaviors, such as putting forth extra effort on the job, following organizational rules and procedures, helping and cooperating with others, volunteering for additional tasks, and supporting organizational objectives, facilitate organizational effectiveness (Borman & Motowidlo, 1997). Indeed, a recent meta-analysis by Whitman, Van Rooy, and Viswesvaran (2010) found that unit-level organizational citizenship behaviors were positively associated with unit-level performance. The positive relationship between organizational citizenship behaviors and task performance may be stronger to the extent to which employees are able to devote their energy toward those behaviors that will be most helpful for the organization. Perhaps, conscientiousness and organizational politics constitute moderators of this relationship as well.

In considering these issues, we suggest a novel application of resource theory. Because additional effort is required for employees to develop additional skills, make changes in their approaches, and cope with organizational change, research is needed to understand how individuals engage in this process and what makes them successful in this endeavor. We chose to focus on conscientiousness as a tool in resource allocation, and organizational politics as a distraction in resource allocation. However, there may be other variables that influence the effectiveness with which employees allocate resources, such as general mental ability and job stress. We encourage future researchers to expand this framework to incorporate other variables.

This study contributes to the growing literature aimed at understanding the role of personality in the workplace. Although we did not find a significant correlation between conscientiousness and task performance, the magnitude of this correlation is similar to uncorrected validity coefficients reported in meta-analytic reviews (Hurtz & Donovan, 2000; Tett, Jackson, & Rothstein, 1991; Vinchur, Schippmann, Switzer, & Roth, 1998). Adaptive performance researchers have also examined conscientiousness as a predictor of adaptive performance, with mostly positive or null findings in field studies (B. Griffin & Hesketh, 2003; M. Griffin et al., 2010; Stewart & Nandkeolyar, 2006) and negative findings in laboratory studies (LePine et al., 2000). We found a positive association between conscientiousness and adaptive performance. This finding supports prior literature that conscientiousness influences the extent to which individuals engage in learning behaviors (perhaps through self-efficacy, as suggested by Martocchio & Judge, 1997). Our results also suggest that conscientiousness plays a role in whether individuals can effectively allocate attention toward gaining those competencies most important for task performance, with characteristics of a person's environment playing an important determining factor.

We suggest that conscientiousness and perceptions of organizational politics influence the extent to which individuals can appropriately devote resources toward translating adaptive performance to task performance. In doing so, we suggest that perceived politics reflects the extent to which employees perceive that they have to closely monitor their behavior to be successful. However, it is possible that perceptions of politics may also be tied to one's ability to navigate such environments. For example, those high in conscientiousness may be better able to read between the lines and, therefore, report lower levels of politics because politics may not necessarily be bothersome to them in their efforts to be successful. We observed a moderate negative correlation between conscientiousness and organizational politics, suggesting that those high in conscientiousness tend to perceive lower organizational politics. Given this observation, we call for more research to determine how individuals develop perceptions of politics and how these perceptions influence their attention and behavior.

Implications for management practice

Given the current pace of change in the workplace, managers are challenged with the task of motivating and instructing employees to engage in adaptive performance behaviors. The success of a unit, or a company, however, depends on the extent to which efforts at adaptive performance are effective at increasing task performance. Our results suggest that it may behoove managers to be aware of perceptions of organizational politics as well as individual proclivities toward effective resource allocation in guiding employees to effectively engage in adaptive performance such that these efforts can translate into higher task performance. These results emphasize the need for managers to ensure not only that performance requirements are clearly specified but also that employees understand which competencies are most important for achieving performance requirements.

Limitations

Although not substantially different from other sample sizes reported in the literature (e.g., Di Milia & Birdi, 2010), we would have preferred our sample size to be larger. A larger sample size may have provided us with increased power; however, the fact that we were able to find support for our hypotheses suggests that these effects are robust.

Additionally, an advantage of our study is the fact that we used two separate raters to rate employees' adaptive performance and task performance. By doing so, we were able to avoid potential biases, such as the halo effect, and the fact that supervisors in call centers are not always privy to employees' performance on the phone (Morgeson & Campion, 1997).

The participants came from one organization and worked in one type of job (i.e., call centers). We suggest that this was an appropriate context for our study because call center employees typically contend with not only changing products and services but also unique customer interactions. Indeed, adaptive performance was originally conceptualized in the sales literature, where adaptive performance reflected customizing and personalizing a sales approach to individual customers (Spiro & Weitz, 1990). In addition to these behaviors, adaptive performance in this context also required being adaptive to changes in the organization's requirements at the same time. However, we emphasize that the generalizability of our findings may be limited to samples composed of jobs characterized by high levels of customer interface. Adaptive performance may reflect a somewhat different set of behaviors depending on the industry and the type of job (Pulakos et al., 2000). For example, adaptive performance for some jobs (e.g., executives) may require a more significant investment of resources than adaptive performance in our study. Additionally, depending on the job, employees may be faced with differing levels of uncertainty in how they should adapt or what the requirements for successful task performance are. That being said, we expect the relationships described in this study to become more profound in more complex jobs, as successful adaptive performance requires additional resource investment. We encourage researchers to replicate and extend our findings in samples of employees with jobs of differing levels of responsibility and complexity.

Finally, we drew from research suggesting that conscientious individuals tend to be more effective in allocating their attentional resources because of their tendencies toward orientation to detail and achievement (Derryberry et al., 2003; McCrae & John, 1992) and that environments perceived as having organizational politics distracts attention (Witt et al., 2002). However, we did not test this directly nor did we measure the exact nature of employees' adaptive performance efforts. Instead, we focused on conscientiousness and organizational politics because these variables can be observed by managers as well as used in personnel selection. However, a qualitative study may be particularly useful in examining exactly how individuals focus their attention in certain situations.

Conclusion

Given the current emphasis on adaptive performance, it is important to investigate the conditions under which increased efforts at adaptive performance result in higher levels of task performance. Using a resource allocation framework, we suggested that a capability to effectively allocate attention—conscientiousness—and the extent to which attentional resources are reduced by one's environment—organizational politics—jointly determine the relationship between adaptive performance and task performance. We encourage future researchers to investigate how organizations can best render efforts directed toward change toward improving overall organizational performance.

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