
Personal Philosophy and Personnel Achievement: Belief in Free Will Predicts Better Job Performance

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Abstract

Do philosophic views affect job performance? The authors found that possessing a belief in free will predicted better career attitudes and actual job performance. The effect of free will beliefs on job performance indicators were over and above well-established predictors such as conscientiousness, locus of control, and Protestant work ethic. In Study 1, stronger belief in free will corresponded to more positive attitudes about expected career success. In Study 2, job performance was evaluated objectively and independently by a supervisor. Results indicated that employees who espoused free will beliefs were given better work performance evaluations than those who disbelieve in free will, presumably because belief in free will facilitates exerting control over one's actions.

Keywords

free will, philosophy, job performance, locus of control, Protestant work ethic, motivation, management science

The extent to which people exercise volition has been the subject of debate for centuries, with some thinkers favoring determinism (e.g., Hobbes, Spinoza) and others (e.g., Milton, Sartre) asserting that people have the power to choose their behaviors and thoughts. This is not just a debate among scholars. Laypersons also differ in their personal philosophies; some view their own behavior as a series of chosen acts, whereas others believe themselves to be at the mercy of childhood experiences, neurochemistry, genetics, or fate. The present investigation does not seek to resolve that debate but to capitalize on those differences of opinion. Specifically, we test the hypothesis that a belief in free will contributes to effective performance in the workplace.

The notion of free will became important in Western thought in the context debates about scientific causality, moral responsibility, and related topics. These may seem like academic issues far removed from everyday behavior. However, an influential investigation by Vohs and Schooler (2008) showed that variations in belief in free will contributed to changes in behavior among students taking a test for money. Specifically, students induced to disbelieve in free will were more likely to cheat on the test, effectively stealing money in the process, as compared to students who were allowed or encouraged to believe in free will. Subsequent work using similar procedures has shown that manipulated disbelief in free will contributes to increases in aggression and decreases in helpful, prosocial inclinations (Baumeister, Masicampo, & DeWall, 2009).

Why should a personal opinion about free will change practical behavior? The essence of the idea of free will is that there is more than one behavior that is possible for a particular person in his or her circumstances (e.g., Kane, 2002). Determinism, which is often opposed to free will (although some so-called compatibilist theories have attempted to reconcile the two), asserts that causal processes make every event inevitable, so that the future is as unalterable as the past. In that view, belief in multiple possibilities (and hence in choice among them) is an illusion. To laypersons, determinism is thus closely related to fatalism, or the belief that it does not matter what you do because you cannot change what is about to happen. Such a belief may undermine the motivation to exert oneself.

Exertion has come to figure prominently in recent theories of agency and the self's executive function. Self-control and decision making appear to deplete an energy resource, indeed one linked to glucose, which is the body's and brain's basic fuel supply (Baumeister, Vohs, & Tice, 2007; Gailliot et al., 2007; Vohs et al., 2008). Thus, in an important and literal sense, it

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takes less energy to yield to lazy, selfish impulses and other temptations than to make oneself overcome such temptations.

Work, almost by definition, consists of behavior done for extrinsic rewards and in response to external demands. The activities involved in work rarely consist of indulging lazy or selfish inclinations; on the contrary, such tendencies must usually be held in check for workers to effectively discharge their duties. Effective work therefore often depends on self-regulation (e.g., control over sexual urges, selfishness, hostility, and laziness) and may invoke the psychological and even biological costs that self-regulation carries.

Thus, work requires a willingness to exert the will, whereas disbelief in free will may reduce that motivation. Our main hypothesis was therefore that disbelief in free will would detract from workplace performance, whereas belief in free will would be conducive to performing well. The goals of the present investigation, however, go beyond merely establishing that variation in beliefs about free will predict workplace performance. Instead, we sought to establish a specific, distinctive contribution of these beliefs. To do that, we assessed several potentially related variables to establish whether the hypothesized effects of free will were independent of them. Each is discussed in turn.

First, locus of control (more precisely termed *locus of control of reinforcement*) is an individual-difference construct based on perceptions of the effects of one's behavior (Rotter, 1966). People with an internal locus of control (internals) believe that their behavior affects the likelihood of receiving reinforcement, whereas those with an external locus of control (externals) believe reinforcement is independent of their behavior. According to expectancy theory (Vroom, 1964), perceiving a relatively strong relationship between efforts and outcomes causes greater efforts, so one would expect internals to put forth more effort toward their job than externals. A qualitative review of the literature concluded that internals have favorable outcomes in several work-related variables compared to externals (Spector, 1982). A quantitative meta-analysis found greater internal locus of control was related to better job performance and higher job satisfaction (Judge & Bono, 2001). A more recent quantitative meta-analysis found that internal locus of control predicted many favorable job-related outcomes (Thomas, Sorensen, & Eby, 2006). Locus of control is also an important part of a trait termed *core self-evaluation* (the other parts being self-esteem, self-efficacy, and emotional stability), and core self-evaluation predicts better job performance (Judge, 2009; Judge & Hurst, 2007).

Both those with an internal locus of control and those who believe in free will perceive a stronger relationship between the individual and the outcome than do externals and determinists. In other words, externals and determinists view the individual as further removed from the outcome than do internals or those who believe in free will. A deterministic view of inevitable outcomes suggests that efforts do not matter because the outcome—good or bad—is predetermined. Thus, one can predict that determinists, like externals, would not put forth the effort required to perform one's job well.

Second, belief in the Protestant work ethic has conceptual overlap with free will. Early Protestants, especially Calvinists, believed that occupational success was a sign of divine favor and therefore a promising predictor of being destined for salvation in heaven (Weber, 1905). In practice, having a strong Protestant work ethic entails a desire to be independent, delay gratification, and achieve success (McClelland, 1961). Those who espouse a Protestant work ethic are demonstrably more industrious and intrinsically motivated than those who do not (Furnham, 1990), which supports the general claim that differences in lay philosophies have implications for job performance. Thus, both the belief in free will and the belief in the Protestant ethic encourage people to exert themselves to succeed in the workplace.

All of the so-called Big Five dimensions of personality have been shown to predict job performance, though only one of them (conscientiousness) produces sizeable correlations (for reviews, see Barrick & Mount, 1991; Tett, Jackson, & Rothstein, 1991). Conscientiousness is most closely related to self-control and the self's executive function, which is highly relevant insofar as our theory emphasizes that belief in free will benefits workplace performance by means of motivating exertions of self-control and executive function.

One heavily researched topic in the job performance literature relates to cognitive ability. Although specific cognitive aptitudes (e.g., verbal or spatial) generally are not good predictors of job performance (e.g., Brown, Le, & Schmidt, 2006; Hunter, 1983; but see Mount, Oh, & Burns, 2008), general mental ability is a reliable predictor of job outcomes (for a review, see Schmidt & Hunter, 2004). It was possible that cognitive ability would be related to belief in free will, and so we sought to establish that any effects of belief in free will remain significant after controlling for cognitive ability.

Personal vitality was another possible confound. Our reasoning emphasized that belief in free will would contribute to willingness to exert energy for self-control and executive function to facilitate workplace performance. The Vitality Scale developed by Ryan and Frederick (1997) assesses individual differences in feelings of energy. That scale was included (in Study 2) to determine whether belief in free will would affect workplace performance independent of differences in feelings of vitality and energy.

Last, we acknowledge the possibility that people who believe in free will may have a more positive, optimistic outlook on life and hence may simply feel better, which could in turn have an impact on job performance. We therefore measured global life satisfaction using Diener, Emmons, Larsen, and Griffin's (1985) scale so as to be able to control for happiness and establish whether the effect of belief in free will would remain significant.

Present Investigation

The present investigation focused on the implications of variations in personal philosophies of freedom of will, with the expectation that belief in free will would translate into better

