

The effects of conflict related obstructions on return to work of long-term sick-listed employees

Master thesis

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Abstract

This master thesis investigates the influence of conflict related obstructions on the outcome of the return to work of long term (more than 13 weeks) sick listed employees. In this study a representative sample of 608 employers of different types of sectors and sizes were questioned with a structured questionnaire. The data was obtained from the study of Piek, Vuuren, Ybema, Joling en Huijs (2008) and was re-analyzed. This master thesis found that the number of conflict related obstructions is associated with less successful RTW outcomes. These obstructions are treated as violation of the psychological contract (Rousseau, 1989). One or more conflict related obstructions are associated to a more negative RTW outcome than not any obstruction and one obstruction is less negative compared to two or more conflict related obstructions. Another finding is that 'own initiative' is associated to the amount of reported conflict related obstructions. The argument is that 'own initiative' of the employee leads to initiative of the employer and that at the same time empowerment has an influence on the association. Besides that, the study found that when employers report conflict related obstructions concerning a specific person before the RTW, they also report more conflict related obstructions about that person during the RTW. This is probably caused by the 'primacy effect'.

Introduction

Piek et al. (2008) found that in 3 of 10 cases employers reported conflict related obstruction(s) concerning return to work (RTW) of sick-listed employees. These were often reported (by 608 questioned employers) answers to the question: Which of the following obstructions were

important during the RTW of the employee? While answering this question the employer had to keep the RTW of one specific person in mind.

This master thesis is about the influence of these conflict related obstructions on the return to work of long-term sick-listed employees.

The reported conflict related obstructions in the study of Piek et al. (2008) concerning return to work were:

1. Before the employee called in sick, the employee had a conflict with a colleague or supervisor
2. Employee and employer had different opinions about the RTW
3. The employee did not co-operate with his RTW
4. Before the employee called in sick, the employee did not perform well

The main question of this master thesis is: What are the effects of these conflict related obstructions on return-to-work?

While investigating and describing the effects of the conflict related obstruction in this master thesis we will first deal with the influence of reported conflicts before the RTW (obstruction 1 and 4), followed by the effect of 'own initiative' on the conflict related obstructions. After this we will attend to the effects of the conflict related obstructions and in the last part the buffering effect of 'own initiative' on the effect of the conflict related obstructions is described and investigated

Before we go into that, we describe if it is justified to call the above described obstructions conflict related. To answer this question we will compare two theories about conflict.

The first theory we will discuss is the theory of Deutch (1991). Deutch (1991) describes three determinants of conflicts. These determinants are valid when there are two parties (individuals or groups) are being involved. Because of this we can say that this theory of Deutch (1991) is valid when we look at the employee-employer relationship. The three determinants are:

1. Contact and visibility of differences
2. Perceived incompatibility
3. Perceived utility of the conflict

We will use the second obstruction (*Employee and employer had different opinions about the RTW*) as example to show that these three determinant are not always applicable to the four obstructions mentioned by Piek et al. (2008). Contact is important because people need to interact to have conflicts. In this master thesis we are certain that there was contact, otherwise the question asking for obstructions could not be answered. For conflicts to emerge, visibility of differences is necessary according to Deutch (1991), because you need the perception of differences between self and others. These two characteristics are necessary conditions for conflicts, but they are not sufficient to give rise to a conflict. In this master thesis the second obstruction indicates contact and visibility of differences. According to Deutch (1991) the differences only give rise to conflicts when they are perceived as incompatible. It is not the objective incompatibilities which give rise to conflicts, but the perceived incompatibilities (subjective). These differences only lead to conflicts if a party perceives utility of the conflict. The second obstruction gives an indication about perceived incompatibilities, but not about perceived utility. Thus, we are unable to draw a conclusion if the second obstruction indicates a conflict according to the definition of Deutch (1991). The same reasoning can be made for the first and fourth obstruction; only the third obstruction indicates a conflict, because having

no co-operation of the employee means that he/ she perceived the utility of the conflict.

According to Deutch (1991) not all obstructions can be called conflict related.

However, if we use the conflict definition of Van Der Vliert (1997), we can call these obstruction conflict related, because when taken a closer look at the definition of ‘a conflict’ (Van der Vliert, 1997) -*There is a conflict between two parties (persons or groups), if one of the two feels frustrated or obstructed by the other person or group* -all four obstructions could indicate a conflict. This definition is often used. The use of Van Der Vliert’s (1996) theory is justified because the conflict related obstructions are in line with the study of Gennard and Judge (2005). This because they stated that conflicts can be evidenced in a number of ways. Examples are: employee frustration, deteriorating interpersonal relationships (obstruction 1 and 2), low morale, poor performance (obstruction 4), disciplinary problems, increased employee absenteeism, withdrawal of employee goodwill and resistance to change (obstruction 3). All examples have negative impacts for organizations. The resemblance between the outcomes of Gennard and Judge’s (2005) study and the conflict related obstructions in this study is striking. Thus, in this master thesis we will use the conflict definition of Van der Vliert (1997).

We will first give some background information about the Dutch context before we will describe our hypotheses.

Background information about Dutch context of return to work

Under the Dutch law the employee and employer have to follow several obligations to improve return to work of the sick-listed employee as soon as possible. The returning of sick-listed employees is called *return-to-work* (RTW). Initially employers use first track RTW,

where they help employees return to their own organization. If this does not succeed the employer will use second track RTW, working with the employee to find alternative employment. These legal procedures are drawn up in the 'Wet Verbetering Poortwachter' (WVP).

According to the WVP it is the employee's obligation to actively co-operate with his RTW and without obstructions. The employee also has to accept appropriate work and to co-operate with any fitness for work assessment. There are also certain requirements for the employer, for example, to contact a medical officer in behalf of their employee, to set up a problem analysis including a RTW advice of a medical officer and to set up a RTW strategy. An evaluation will be done after a year. A report of the RTW is created 87 days after reporting illness from the employee. This RTW report is revised 24 months after reporting illness. After 97 weeks it is possible to request a 'Wet Werk en Inkomen naar arbeidsvermogen (WIA)' (disability benefit).

The legislator has drawn up regulations to avoid conflicts. When there are conflicts about the ability to work, appropriate work, or about the sufficiency of the RTW efforts, there is a possibility to contact an impartial expert at the 'Uitvoeringsinstituut werknemersverzekeringen' (UWV) (Dutch social security authority). Judgment can be made in behalf of both employer and employee. Another potential condition to avoid conflicts is the employer's obligation to appoint a case manager. This must be done in the eighth week after the announcement of the employees' illness. According to the legal point of view the case manager guides the RTW activities and arranges contact between employee, employer and 'ARBO-dienst' (Occupational health service). The case manager is the 'lubricating oil' of the RTW process according to Van der Vegt (2003). This in practice means that it is desirable that the case manager acts as an intermediary and mediator.

Conflicts before will lead to conflicts during Return-to-Work

In this study we will make a distinction between conflicts occurring before and during the RTW. We expect that when employers report obstruction before the RTW, he/ she will report more obstructions during the RTW. We expect this because of a primacy effect and a confirmation bias.

A primacy effect is the situation that initial information of a target has a greater influence on the judgment of that target than subsequently obtained information. There are different studies that prove the primacy effect. One of those studies (Jones, Rock, Shaver, Goethals & Ward, 1968) is about participants observing a woman taking a test with problems of different difficulty. The woman answered 15 out of 30 correctly in every observation session. The only difference was that one group watched the woman answering most of the first asked questions correctly and the other group watched the woman answering most of the last questions correctly. A primacy effect was found because the first group judged the woman more intelligent than the second one. A same effect was found in one of the experiments described in the study of Asch (1946). In this study the participants had to form impressions of persons described with a list of traits. Again there were two groups. In both groups the same list of traits were described. The only difference was that in the first group positive traits were presented first and at the last group this was reversed. A primacy effect was found because participants of the first group had a more positive image about the target person.

We expect that employers judge employees more negative when they reported conflicts before the RTW (primacy effect) and that this will lead to more reported obstructions of the employee during the RTW (confirmation bias).

A confirmation bias is a tendency of people to judge information that verifies existing beliefs. There are different studies that show this tendency. Darley & Gross (1980) conducted one of those studies. In this study all the participants had to judge a child (girl) taking a videotaped academic test. There were two conditions. In one condition participants were led to believe that the child was from a low socioeconomic background and in the other condition participants were led to believe that the child was from a high socioeconomic background. The child got higher ratings from the participants who believed that she was from a high socioeconomic background than the other group.

The study of Anderson, Lepper and Ross (1980), shows that the confirmation bias can be very strong. In this study subjects were given a case study that suggests a positive relationship between risk taking and the success as a firefighter or were given a case that suggests a negative relationship. There was an experimental and a control group. The experimental subjects got an extensive debriefing about the fictitious nature of the case studies. Afterward the subjects were questioned for their personal beliefs. The participants in both experimental conditions were sticking to their initial beliefs, they did not abandon their theory about fire fighting.

Hypothesis 1: It is expected that when obstructions are reported before the RTW, the employer is more inclined to report other obstructions during the RTW.

Influence of own initiative on conflict related obstructions

We have two lines of reasoning why 'own initiative' have positive influence on reported conflict related obstructions. The first line of reasoning is that employees showing 'own initiative' are more empowered. This is a process of giving employees throughout an organization the authority to make important decisions and to be responsible for their

outcomes (George and Jones, 2008). Thus, empowered employees are accustomed to be responsible for outcomes. We expect that responsibility has a positive influence on reported obstructions. People who show 'own initiative' are showing responsibility. Therefore we think that 'own initiative' has a positive influence on the reported obstructions.

The second line of reasoning is that 'own initiative' results in matching behaviour. In this case, 'own initiative' of an employee leads to 'own initiative' of an employer. Nauta (1996) describes a number of different situations where people use matching behaviour. These situations are derived from different studies. The different situations are: Integrative and distributive behaviour, procedural claims, avoidance of conflicts, affective claims, other people claims, concessions, and fighting behaviour. According to the study of Nauta (1996) there is a mismatch of behaviour at dominant or submissive behaviour. 'Own initiative' can be considered as a confronting behaviour and this confronting behaviour is an integrative process according to Walton and McKersie (1965). We just mentioned that integrative behaviour is a situation where people use matching behaviour (Nauta, 1996). Thus, we expect that 'own initiative' of the employee leads to initiative from the employer and that through these matching principles, conflicts would be avoided or settled faster.

Hypothesis 2: When employees show 'own initiative' there will be fewer reported obstructions than in situations where employees do not show 'own initiative'.

Effects of conflicts on Return-to-Work

In this study we start from the viewpoint that all the above reported obstructions are negative for the RTW. We expect that if obstructions are reported, the chances for return-to-work are less.

The reported conflict related obstructions in the study of Piek et al. (2008) concerning return to work were:

1. Before the employee called in sick, the employee had a conflict with a colleague or supervisor
2. Employee and employer had different opinions about the RTW
3. The employee did not co-operate with his RTW
4. Before the employee called in sick, the employee did not perform well

We expect that the first obstruction is negative because an employer reporting and remembering this about his employee will not have a very positive image of this employee and this will not be constructive for the RTW. We made this argument based on Jones's correspondent inference theory (Jones and Davis, 1965). According to this theory people try to understand other people by analyzing their behavior. People make inferences about behavior based on three factors.

1. Degree of choice (of behavior): Freely chosen behavior is more informative for people making dispositional judgments of others than forced behavior (Jones & Harris, 1967)
2. Expectedness (of behavior): An action gives more information about a person when it departs from the norm. Actions which are typical, part of social role or otherwise expected the circumstances give less information. (Jones, Davis & Gergen, 1961)
3. Effects (of behavior): Many potential outcomes for a certain act are less able to predict a persons specific motives than an act with one outcome (Newton, 1974).

We expect that the first obstruction (perceiving and remembering conflicts of employees with a colleague or supervisor) cause negative inferences about the employee made by the

employer. We expect this because the obstruction departs from the norm (expectedness), the outcome is negative (effect) and there is a sizable chance that the employer sees the behavior as freely chosen (degree of choice).

For the second obstruction (Employee and employer had different opinions about the RTW) it is less clear if this obstruction is negative. We expect that this obstruction is negative because the study of Tjosvold and de Dreu (1997) reported that unwillingness to engage in an open-minded discussion was related to competitive goals. These competitive goals were in turn connected with unproductive outcomes. At the second obstruction there is a situation of competitive goals, therefore we think that this obstruction is negative for the RTW. We expect that the third and fourth obstructions are also negative. The reason for this is that these obstructions also point to competitive goals, because not co-operating and poor performance are incompatible with the goals of the employer.

Hypotheses 3: The four conflict related obstructions are negative for the RTW outcome.

In the literature the term psychological contract is used to describe the relation between the employee and employer. Psychological contracts are individual beliefs in reciprocal obligations between the individual and the organization (Rousseau, 1989). This means that there is an exchange relationship between the individual and the organization. The organization promises the employee outcomes and in return the employee makes contributions to the organization.

Trust is very important for the psychological contract; this trust develops from the belief that contributions will be reciprocated. When terms of the psychological contract are violated, trust is damaged and experiences of anger, resentment, a sense of injustice and wrongful harm will occur. These reactions are not only attributable to the unmet expectations but also to

more general beliefs about respect for persons, codes of conduct, and other patterns of behavior associated with relationships involving trust (Rousseau, 1989). We expect that the obstructions are perceived as violation of the psychological contract from the employer's point of view. These violations will undermine the trust of the employer and in this situation we expect that the employers will not do their utmost to help the employees in their RTW. We expect that employers reporting one obstruction are more willing to help than employers reporting more than one obstruction. We assume that this lack of help is detrimental for the RTW outcome.

Hypothesis 4: The more reported obstructions by the employer, the more negative RTW outcome.

In the first hypothesis we expected that when obstructions are reported before the RTW, more obstructions will be reported during the re-integration. In the fourth hypothesis we assumed that more obstructions are worse than just one obstruction for the outcome of RTW. We do not expect an additive effect of obstructions occurring before and during the RTW. A more negative effect of obstructions is expected, when as well obstructions before as during the RTW are reported. This means that we are testing the moderating effect for 'conflicts before the RTW' on the relation between 'conflict related obstructions reported during the RTW' and RTW outcome. In this hypothesis, we use the same line of reasoning as in the third hypothesis. We again expect that this effect is caused by the primacy effect and confirmation bias. This primacy effect will lead to biased perception of the employer (confirmation bias) and will subsequently cause the negative RTW outcome.

Hypothesis 5: Obstructions reported during the RTW are more negative for the RTW-outcome, when obstructions are reported before the RTW.

Buffering negative effects of conflicts on Return-to-Work

In hypotheses 2 it is expected that ‘own initiative’ goes together with a smaller number of reported obstructions and in hypotheses 4 it is expected that less obstructions are related to better RTW outcomes than more obstructions. We expect that people showing ‘own initiative’ are better in handling conflicts, because they are more empowered (see hypothesis 2). We expect that reported ‘own initiative’ will lead to better outcomes than in situations when it is not. Thus, it is expected that while predicting the outcome of the re-integration, the influence of obstructions on the success of re-integration is moderated by ‘own initiative’.

Hypothesis 6: The influence of conflict related obstructions on the RTW outcome is moderated by ‘own initiative’.

Method

In this study data from Piek et al. (2008) is used. For their study they interviewed employers with two or more employees. The employers who were interviewed were responsible for the RTW at their organization. The interviews were taken by telephone. From the approached employers, 68,9% participated in the study. When taking the failures to contact the employer into account, the response rate was 48,9%. In total 1296 employers were interviewed. First all interviewed employers had to pass a screening interview. This screening interview asked for (amongst other things) occurrences of long term (more than 13 weeks) sick-listed employees in the past two years. When the employer confirmed this question, the complete interview was administered. The complete interview was taken by 608 employers. We will focus on the part

where the employer had to keep the RTW of one person in mind while answering different questions of the RTW of this person

To get a representative sample, relatively smaller organizations were approached because there were less long-term sick-listed employees in these organizations. This correction resulted in an equal representation of organizations of different sizes (see Table 1). Also the samples for different sectors were also almost equal (See Table 1)

Table 1

Number of interviewed employers relative to sector and size of organization.

Size	Sectors					
Number of employees in organization	Agriculture,	Construction,	Trade,	Education,	Care,	
	Mining, Industry, Public utilities	Transportation, Communication	Hotel and catering industry	Government	Welfare	Services
Number of employees						
2-9	18	15	28	22	21	23
10-19	20	20	20	20	20	20
20-49	20	20	20	20	20	20
50-99	21	20	20	20	20	20
100	20	20	20	20	20	20

Overall it can be concluded that different sizes and different types of organization are equally represented in this study.

The following table gives information about the age (range: 18 - 63), gender and occupational level of the employees (table 2).

Table 2

Background information of the employees returning to their work.

Variables	Number of employees	Percentage of total employees
Age		
18-25	35	5,9%
26-35	135	22,8%
36-45	174	29,4%
46-55	178	30,1%
56-65	69	11,7%
Missing	17	2,8%
Gender		
Male	326	53,6%
Female	274	45,1%
Missing	8	1,3%

Occupational level		
<hr/>		
Unskilled level	35	5,8%
Low skilled level	181	29,8%
Middle skilled level	229	37,7%
High skilled level	151	24,8%
Missing	12	2,0%

Next we describe the different measures.

Obstructions

Piek et al. (2008) used a quantitative questionnaire. For this study we used the questions of the quantitative questionnaire which would contribute to the main question of this article.

The most important question for this study is the question that asks for obstructions at the RTW. The question is: *Did the following obstructions have an influence on the RTW?*

For this study we used four obstructions stated at this question:

1. Before the employee called in sick, the employee had a conflict with a colleague or supervisor.
2. Employee and employer had different opinions about the RTW.
3. The employee did not co-operate with his RTW.
4. Before the employee called in sick, the employee did not perform well.

For each statement the employer gave a ‘yes’ or ‘no’ answer. In this study we needed a variable which could measure the amount of obstructions. Therefore we compute the total of

the above mentioned obstructions for each respondent (*'Number of obstructions'*). We also used a variable which described if one or more of the above obstructions are mentioned or not (*'Obstructions yes-or-no'*). Coded: yes = 1 and no = 0.

Obstructions occurring before and during the RTW

Again, we used the reported obstructions described in the first variable (number of obstructions). For the variable *'conflicts before the RTW'*, the following obstructions were used:

- Before the employee called in sick, the employee did not perform well
- Before the employee called in sick, the employee had a conflict with a colleague or supervisor.

For the variable *'obstructions during the RTW'* the following obstructions were used:

- Employee and employer had different opinions about the RTW.
- The employee did not co-operate with his RTW.

We treated single and multiple reported obstructions the same for both variables.

Own initiative

The question measuring this variable is: *Did the employee take initiative for his or her RTW?*

The possible answers were: Yes to a large extent, Yes to a small extent, No, Do not know.

For this study the answers are recorded into two categories. Yes (first two answers) and No (last two answers), coded: yes = 1 and no = 0. We did this recoding because the study of Van

Vuuren Ybema (2009) did not find a difference between little 'own initiative' in comparison to a lot 'own initiative' in predicting the RTW outcome.

RTW outcome

The question measuring this variable is: *Did the organization succeed in the return to work of the employee into their own organization?*

The possible answers were: Not yet clear/ We are working on it, Yes the employee is returned to work successfully, Employee started again but finally the work appeared too hard/difficult, No the employee has not (yet) started working again in his present organization. This question is recorded into two categories. Yes (second answer) and No (first, third and fourth answer), coded: yes = 1 and no = 0.

Data analysis

In this master thesis we only needed to compute the variable number of obstruction. We computed this variable by summing the number of obstruction (range: 0 – 4 obstructions) of each respondent. The other variables were asked with one question and were recoded. In the description of the variables we describe how this recoding was done. For answering the different questions we used different data-analysis techniques, because we needed to compare groups and test moderation effects. Due to the limitations of a dichotomy-dependent variable, answering the hypotheses required non-parametric tests. We used the Mann-Whitney test and binary logistical regression analysis. We used the binary logistic regression for testing the two interaction effects and the Mann-Whitney test for comparing groups.

In this master thesis we have a dichotomous independent and moderator variable. In this situation one can calculate interaction effect, with a 2*2 ANOVA (See: Baron and Kenny,

1986). In this master thesis we calculate the interaction effect with a binary logistic regression (Cabrera, 1994), because we have a dichotomous dependent variable. We first added age gender and occupational level as control variables in the model, and then we added the predictor variable, the moderator variable and the moderator effect in subsequent steps (Frazier, Barron & Tix, 2004).

Results

Hypothesis 1

This hypothesis is in relation to the differences between obstructions taking place before or during the RTW. The hypothesis states: It is expected that when obstructions are occurring before the RTW, the employer is more inclined to report other obstructions during the RTW. The independent variable for this hypothesis is ‘obstruction occurring before the RTW’. As dependent variable, the variable ‘obstructions during the RTW’ is used. This variable will be compared for employers reporting obstructions before the RTW versus employee not reporting obstructions. To make this comparison, we use a Mann-Whitney test. When we compare that when an obstruction was reported before the RTW with when it was not, the chance of reporting obstructions during the RTW was larger ($Z=-8.205$, $N = 596$, $p < 0.001$). This result confirms our hypothesis.

Hypothesis 2

This hypothesis is about the influence of ‘own initiative’ on quantity of obstructions. The hypothesis states that ‘own initiative’ reported by the employer is related to fewer reported obstructions by the employer.

To investigate this hypothesis we use two tests. First we test 'own initiative', for no obstructions compared to one. Second we test 'own initiative', for one compared to two or more obstructions. For both tests, a Mann-Whitney test is used. 'Reported obstructions' is the dependent variable and 'own initiative' is the independent variable.

When employers reported 'own initiative', less obstructions were reported, when comparing zero and one obstruction ($Z = -2.733$, $N = 525$, $p = 0.003$). Also less obstructions were reported when comparing one and two or more obstructions for reported 'own initiative' ($Z = -2.136$, $N = 140$, $p < 0.017$). Thus fewer obstructions are reported by the employer when 'own initiative' is reported by the employer. These outcomes confirm our hypothesis.

Hypothesis 3

The third hypothesis predicted that the four conflict related obstructions were negative for the RTW. This hypothesis states that the four reported obstructions are negative for the RTW-outcome. First we calculated percentage of successful RTW outcome for (not) reporting the different obstructions, see table 3

Table 3 Percentage of RTW outcome on the different conflict related obstructions.

	Employee working again in present organization (first track)	
	No	Yes
Obstructions		
Before the employee called in sick, the employee had a conflict with a colleague or supervisor (obstruction 1)		
No	61,7%	38,3%
Yes	81,1%	18,9%
Employee and employer had different opinions about the RTW (obstruction 2)		
No	61%	39%
Yes	85,7%	14,3%
The employee did not co-operate with his RTW (obstruction 3)		
No	60,7%	39,3%
Yes	81,8%	18,2%
Before the employee called in sick, the employee did not perform well (obstruction 4)		
No	61%	39%
Yes	80,6%	19,4%

Table 3 reveals that all obstructions have about the same negative influence on the RTW outcome. Next we wish to know if the four obstructions are negative for the RTW outcome. To test this we divided every obstruction into two groups. One group reporting the obstruction and one group who did not report the obstruction. We tested with a Mann-Whitney test if there was a significant difference between the two groups for every obstruction. The analysis of the obstruction reveals that all four obstructions are negative for the RTW outcome, see table 4. These outcomes confirm our first hypotheses.

Table 4

Outcomes of negative influences on the RTW outcome of the conflict related obstructions (Computed with a Mann-Whitney test).

Obstructions	Z	Sig. (one tailed)
Before the employee called in sick, the employee had a conflict with a colleague or supervisor (obstruction 1)	-2,81	0,002
Employee and employer had different opinions about the RTW (obstruction 2)	-3,65	0,000
The employee did not co-operate with his RTW (obstruction 3)	-3,59	0,000
Before the employee called in sick, the employee did not perform well (obstruction 4)	-3,13	0,001

Hypothesis 4

This hypothesis is in relation to the influence of conflict related obstructions on the outcome of the RTW. The hypothesis states: *The more reported obstructions by the employer, the more negative RTW outcome.*

The first part of this hypothesis predicts an effect of obstructions on the RTW outcome. We compare one or more obstructions with no obstructions. To test this, we used a Mann-Whitney test. There is a significant negative effect of one or more obstructions on the RTW compared to no obstructions ($Z = -4.056$, $N = 588$, $p < 0.001$).

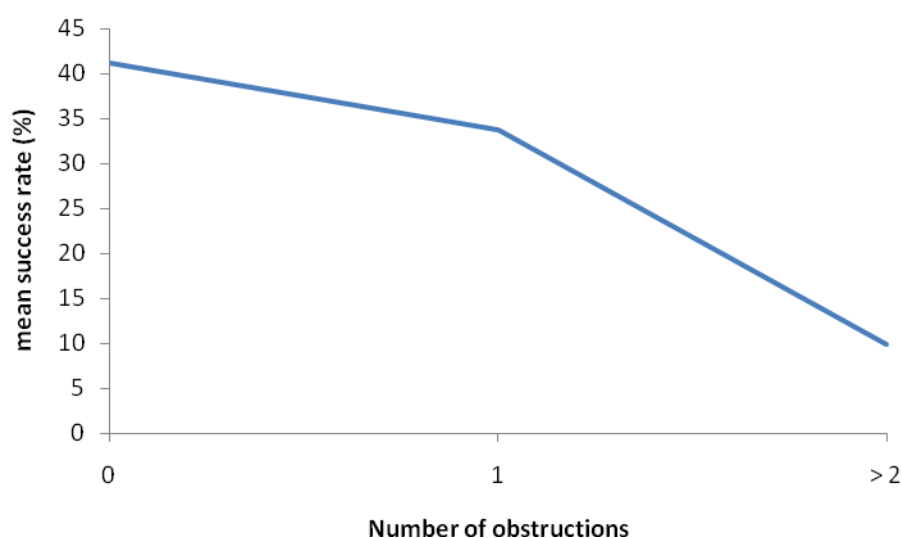
The second part of this hypothesis predicts that more obstructions lead to worse outcomes. Therefore we compare one reported obstruction with two or more reported obstructions. To test this we used Mann-Whitney test. There is significant negative effect for more reported obstructions ($Z = -3.649$, $N = 140$, $p = 0,001$).

To get a better point of view about the numbers of obstructions and the RTW outcome, we compute percentages of success for the different numbers of obstructions (see Figure 1). This figure reveals that more obstructions lead to worse outcomes.

All these results confirm our hypothesis.

Figure 1

Success rate in relation to number of obstructions



Note: We summed the second, third and fourth obstruction because we had few responses in those categories.

Hypothesis 5

This hypothesis is in relation to the influence of obstructions occurring before and during the RTW. It is expected that reported obstructions by the employer during the RTW are more negative for the RTW outcome, when obstructions before the RTW are reported. Thus, ‘obstructions before the RTW’ and ‘obstructions during the RTW’ are the independent variables and RTW outcome is the dependent variable.

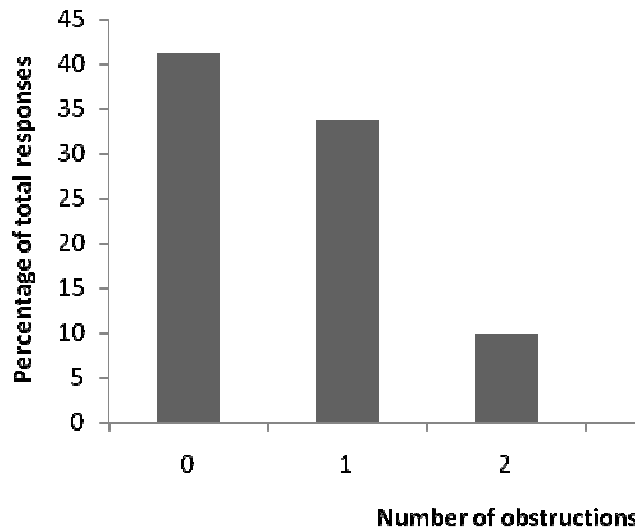
To test the prediction that ‘obstructions during the RTW’ are more negative for the RTW-outcome when obstructions before the RTW are reported, we use binary logistic regression. To test this prediction we computed the interaction effect of obstructions during versus obstructions before the RTW. We controlled for age, occupational level and gender. The interaction effect was not significant, $Wald(1) = 0.657, p = 0.418$.

Hypothesis 6

This hypothesis is in relation to the mediating effect of ‘own initiative’. We predict that ‘own initiative’ moderates the relation between ‘number of obstructions’ and the RTW outcome. The independent variable in this hypothesis is ‘number of obstructions’. This variable is described in figure 2.’

Figure 2

Percentages of total for different number of obstructions



The distribution in Figure 1 reveals that most employers did not report any of these obstructions, but still there are a large amount of employers who did report one or more of these obstructions (24,8%). The mediator variable is ‘own initiative’ and the dependent variable is the RTW outcome. First we look at the influence of both the independent and mediator variable on the RTW outcome. We plot ‘own initiative’ and ‘obstructions: yes or no’ (we transformed ‘number of conflicts’ into this variable to make a better comparison) against each other to see their joint effect (see Table 2). We use a binary logistic chance formula, because this formula takes the S-shaped curve of a logistic regression line into account (Cabrera, 1994).

Table 5

Percentages of successful RTW outcome for ‘own initiative’ and ‘number of obstructions’, computed with the binary logistic regression chance formula (Crabera, 1994).

Obstructions	‘Own initiative’	
	<i>Yes</i>	<i>no</i>
<i>no</i>	46,7%	23,5%
<i>yes</i>	30,2%	13,4%

Note that there are compound influences of obstructions and ‘own initiative’. When employers report own initiative of the employee and no obstructions, the effect is much stronger than when only ‘own initiative’ or no obstructions are reported.

Next we wish to know if there is a moderation effect of ‘own initiative’. To test this we used binary logistic regression. We controlled for ‘age’, occupational level and gender. The moderation effect was not significant, $Wald(1) = 2.648$, $p = 0.104$, see table 3.

Table 6

Binary logistic outcome for the moderation-effect of 'own initiative'

Variable	B	S.E.	Wald	df	Sig.	Exp(B)
Step 1						
Age	-,019	,009	4,535	1	,033	,981
Occupational level	,332	,110	9,026	1	,003	1,393
Gender	-,009	,190	,002	1	,964	,991
Step 2						
Obstruction yes-or-no	-1,395	,489	8,133	1	,004	,248
Own initiative	,702	,257	7,450	1	,006	2,018
Step 3						
Obstruction yes-or-no * own initiative	,913	,561	2,648	1	,104	2,493

Discussion

In 30% of the RTW cases employers experience obstructions which are due to problems in the relation between employer and employee (Piek et al. 2008). This master thesis focused on these relational problems, specifically on conflict related obstructions.

The most important outcome of this study is that conflict related obstructions have a profound influence on the RTW. All conflict related obstructions have a negative influence on the RTW outcome and more obstructions lead to worse RTW outcomes. Another outcome of this master thesis is that when there already was/were obstruction(s) before the RTW, more obstructions were reported by the employer during the RTW. When employers reported 'own initiative' from the employee, less obstructions were reported by the employer. We did not found support for the moderating effect of 'own initiative' on the relation between conflict related obstruction and RTW outcome. Likewise we did not found support for the moderating effect of 'conflict related obstructions before the RTW' on the relation between 'conflicts related obstructions during the RTW' and RTW outcome.

In the next part of the master thesis we will discuss theoretical contributions, practical contributions, strengths and weaknesses of this study.

Theoretical contributions

An important finding of this study is that it underscored the negative influence of conflict related obstructions on the RTW outcome. In the literature positive effect of conflicts are claimed in certain circumstances (Baron, 1991). As we expected, in this study a positive effect of conflict related obstructions on the RTW was not found. The expected negative effect was found, but it is remarkable that this study showed very large differences in outcomes between single and multiple obstructions. Thus, an important theoretical contribution of this study is that the quantity of conflict related obstructions is a good predictor of the RTW outcome.

Another theoretical contribution is that it is very important how the employer perceives the efforts of the employee in the origination of conflicts. This study showed that less conflict

related obstructions are reported by the employer when he perceives ‘own initiative’ of his employee. In the introduction of this study we reasoned that ‘own initiative’ is a confronting/ integrative conflict style. It seems that this confronting/ integrative conflict style is an effective strategy for employees who want to return to their work, because fewer conflicts are reported. This is in line with the study of Friedman, Tidd, Currall and Tsai (2000) who reported that people using an integrative conflict style have less task conflicts, which reduces relationship conflicts, which in turn reduces stress.

Practical contributions

From this study some practical contributions can be set up. We describe three contributions.

The first and most important practical contribution of this study is that obstructions do have a profound effect on the RTW and employers need to consider it. From this study it appeared that every obstruction and extra obstruction had a negative influence on the RTW. Thus, employers need to take measures to overcome conflict related obstructions if they want a successful RTW.

The second practical contribution is that if employers perceive that employees are showing ‘own initiative’, employers report less obstructions in relation to that person. This study also showed that less conflict related obstructions lead to a better RTW outcome. Thus, it is recommended for employees to show the right behavior. Employers can help their employees by giving them clear feedback on their behavior. Another possibility for employers is that they get training in conflict handling. This training helps the employers showing the right behaviors to overcome conflict related obstructions.

The third contribution is that employers need to be aware of conflict related obstructions occurring before the RTW. This study revealed that when employers reported conflict related obstructions *before* the RTW of a particular employee, they more often reported conflict related obstructions *during* the RTW. In this master thesis we argued that this was caused by the confirmation bias and primacy effect. Making the responsible person accountable for the RTW is a way to overcome this primacy effect and confirmation bias. Because the study of Tetlock (1983) revealed that making persons accountable before judging a person will fade the primacy effect and confirmation bias. Another reason is that the study of De Dreu, Steinel & Koole (2000) found that making persons accountable before a negotiations reduce fixed-pie perceptions (tendency to view own priorities and priorities of the other as diametrically opposed).

Strength

This study has different strengths. An obvious strength is that this study looks through the eyes of the employer. Most studies ask information from the persons they want to obtain results from. (For example, the studies we referred to in this master thesis: Friedman et al., 2000; Baron 1991). Self reports are more vulnerable to bias than reports of others, because when people judge themselves they often give socially desirable answers and do impression management.

Another strength is the sample of this study. The sample has good distribution over different sizes and sorts of organizations. The different sizes and sorts of organizations are almost equally distributed in this study. The sample is also relatively large. This makes it easier to generalize the results of this study in other situations.

Limitations

There are also some limitations of this master thesis. The most important limitation is that this study was retrospective. In this master thesis the employers were questioned after the RTW of a specific employee. It is possible that the employers made a coherent picture of the RTW of the employee, and were unwilling to reveal contradictions. This possibly caused the relationships found in this study. We think that the influence of this limitation is limited. This because the dependent variable was about a fact (RTW outcome), and was asked after the independent variable. In the third and fifth hypothesis the independent was questioned before the dependent variable, thus one need to be more careful about the following outcomes: the influence of 'own initiative' on conflict related obstructions and the moderation effect for 'own initiative' on 'conflict related obstructions' / 'RTW outcome' relationship.

One also needs to be concerned about the reliability of this study. In this study most variables were only questioned with one item. This was due to the practical nature of this master thesis and the limitation of the data set we analyzed. Thus, the question is if we have really measured the variables we wanted to measure.

Another limitation is the cross-sectional design of this study. We did one important intervention to overcome this limitation. We extensively used literature about our subject in forming the hypothesis for this study. The sample of organizations was also very representative (see table 1). Therefore we can be more certain about the effects found.

Theoretically this design has limitations, but practically it is not a very big problem. We are sure that conflict related obstructions have an influence on the RTW and that every extra conflict is negative. We do know that employers need to do something about it to have better RTW outcomes.

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