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## Psychological Contract Perception and Contractual Employee Performance

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# PSYCHOLOGICAL CONTRACT PERCEPTION AND CONTRACTUAL EMPLOYEE PERFORMANCE

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Contractual, short-term employees are increasingly utilized to support organizational performance. The employee's perception of the psychological contract were explored in this qualitative study through semi-structured interviews of 22 contractual workers. Psychological contract was fulfilled through transactional job tasks and psychological contract breaches were found in relationships with leadership and the organization. An exploratory examination from the contractual worker lens helped to influence the psychological contract on the employee performance and its use in leveraging this workforce to improve organizational performance.

**PROFESSIONAL CONTRACTUAL WORKERS** are the fastest-growing subset of contingent workers emerging into the newest gig economy. Professional contractor subsidizes specialized work and talent needed in organizations seeking leaner, skillful worker (Lemmon et al., 2016). The Department of Labor (DOL) lists contractual workers as those who are contractually hired with little expectation of continued employment beyond the implicit or explicit nature of the job requirements and are considered temporary or short-term employment (Kosanovich, 2018). According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics in 2017, 55 million people in the United States were employed as contractual workers, which accounts for 34% of the U.S. workforce and is projected to increase to 43% in 2020 (International Labour Organization, n.d.).

Employers and workers are taking full advantage of contractual work in modern global enterprises (Lemmon et al., 2016). The expansion of the gig economy, characterized as the freelance work subsidizing the current workforce, is enterprising for organizations seeking short-term contract-based workers to complement lean operations (Millward & Brewerton, 1999). Global expansion attracts contract workers who are entrepreneurial, need flexibility in equalizing work responsibilities with their lifestyle, or because short-term, contractual jobs are what is most

available (Lemmon et al., 2016). Of the type of contractual workers in the workforce, highly skilled professionals are vastly sought by organizations that need specific expertise to supplement work and strengthen organizational performance (George, 2015).

Professional contract pay, the span of worksite locations, and meaningful contribution to organizational outcomes are alluring to professional contractors (George, 2015). McKeown and Cochrane (2012) stated professional contract workers are most fulfilled by the opportunity to fill gaps in organizational knowledge. Additionally, professional contractors, when respected as a subset of organizational experts, aptly resolve complex issues, strengthen projects, and leverage organizational strategies. The intensity of the work completed by professional contractors that are contextual to the industry and organization complements workplace satisfaction and belongingness (Piasna, 2018). Thus, an employment relationship ensues between the employer and the professional contractor. Human resource management defines the employment relationship as the time a contractual worker is recruited and hired for a limited time of work (Berg, 2017; Karambelkar & Bhattacharya, 2017), is oriented into their new role, and becomes entrenched in social and technical workplace nuances (Karambelkar & Bhattacharya, 2017).

An employment relationship is cultivated as the contractual worker *onboards* or assimilates to organizational relational elements (e.g., employer–worker interactions) and transactional processes (e.g., job tasks and performance goals) (Berg, 2017). Onboarding can endure through the contract time to allow workers to recalibrate to frequent or infrequent disruptions in workplace functions or structures (Horney, 2016; Caldwell & Peters, 2018). During the onboarding processes, the contractual worker’s psychological contract expectations are forming from the direct contact and interactions with leaders, colleagues, tasks, and peripheral organizational activity as does happen with any newly employed individual (Caldwell & Peters, 2018). The onboard process should be robust as it is a precursor of the employment relationship developing the dyadic psychological contract between organizational leaders and their workers (Conway & Briner, 2005; Caldwell & Peters, 2018).

Expectations of the dyadic psychological contract relationship should be established and clear so that contractual workers are fully aware of what to expect and experience little to no breach because of their temporary status (Rousseau & Tijoriwala, 1996; Horney, 2016). Yet, the demands of the job and employee necessities stress the attention leaders spend managing the psychological bond with full-time and permanent employees leaving very little time to attend to the psychological contract for contractual workers; unless the contractual worker’s socialization is fused within the organizational employee workspace (Conway & Briner, 2002). Psychological contract fusion can occur when the contractual employee’s interactions are welded to organizational socialization as an active organizational member (Lemmon et al., 2016). An example of psychological contract fusion might be when a contractual worker physically arrives at an office location each workday, has similar access as the leader and employees to the workspace, and sits in an assigned cubicle or office. The contractual worker also demonstrates organizational cultural behaviors like employees and interacts socially as a member of the workgroup (Bujacz et al., 2017). When contractual workers have more distance away from normal workplace socialization, the psychological contract connection is not as fused (Bujacz et al., 2017; Gupta et al., 2018). Our study fills gaps in research explaining contractual worker psychological fusion within employer–worker interactions. Our study aims to paint a compelling story about the relational needs of contract workers for management practitioners, leaders, and human resources professionals to consider when hiring the workers simply for their skills.

## REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Contemporary literature on the uber-dependence on contractual workers necessitates a fresh look at employment relationship practices in the formation of the psychological contracts (Horney, 2016). Popular leadership development literature indicates leaders are expected to be proficient in establishing expectations of all worker types and activators of the energy and efforts workers expend to be fully engaged with work tasks and work relationships (Klein et al., 2015). Lacking is research connecting the employment relationship factors to the psychological contract formation of leaders and contractual workers (Lemmon et al., 2016); especially from the lens of professional contractors (George, 2015; Clark, 2016; Lemmon et al., 2016; Bujacz et al., 2017).

There is minimal literature about the complexity of leaders sourcing the psychological and organizational needs of employee types (e.g., full time, part time, temporary, and contractual). Less is known about the contractual workers’ idealistic employment relationship requirements which may not be humanly possible for the few leaders within a hierarchical organizational structure to satisfy (Rousseau & Tijoriwala, 1998; Rousseau et al., 2006). This study stocks the deficiency in the literature regarding the contractual workers’ expectations of organizational leaders to, in a psychological and social way, affirm the worker’s efforts and contribution to organizational performance (Hui, Lee, & Rousseau, 2004).

Most of the literature on the formation of the psychological contract at work centers on employer–employee relationships or leader-member interactions (Rousseau & Tijoriwala, 1996). Rousseau and Tijoriwala (1996, 1998) laid the groundwork for understanding the psychological contract in four domains that were either transactional or relational. The four domains were intrinsic job characteristics (transactional), equitable working conditions (transactional), benefits and rewards (relational), and good faith and fair dealings (relational) (Rousseau & Tijoriwala (1996, 1998). The seminal work of Argyris (1960) and Levinson et al. (1962) describe the psychological contract as organic to the nature of the subjective interchange of relationships within the employment environment. Schein (1980) added that the employment relationship induced mostly by leaders curated interpretations of promise and obligation to workers’ well-being and healthy socialization based on individual needs. Early works of Homans (1958) conceptualized the psychological contract within the domain of social exchange theory which proposes the benefits and costs to human interactions and relationships mitigate risks and rewards. Since Homans’ (1958) report, studies on the psychological contract have

been few and broadly framed as the development and maintenance of the relationship between individual employees and the organization (Taylor et al., 2006). Psychology studies on the psychological contract look deeper into the formation of the psychological experiences forming in the human psyche (e.g., conscious awareness forming perceptual ideas relating to external experiences) with lesser attention to psyche interactions specifically at work (Millward & Brewerton, 1999). Social and business scholars are more interested in how psyche formation and function interchanges with work behaviors, performance, and well-being of individual and collective workers (Robinson & Rousseau, 1994) which our research covers.

We followed the relational stream while emphasizing the importance of psychological reasoning functioning in the perceptions and experiences of professional contractual workers (Millward & Brewerton, 1999). A heuristic examination of the psychological contract efficacy presented a practical and experiential perspective unique to the employer–contractual worker relationship. Our study aides the lagging literature on contractual workers’ psychological contract ideations for scholarly and practitioner use. The study outcomes are useful for management and human resources scholars and practitioners in understanding and consulting on the employment relationship idealistic of the new era of professional contractual workers who are integral to business profitability and competitive sustainability.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Psychological contract theory (PCT) framed the research for our study. The scope of PCT is in valuing the interchange of associations and rewards within employment relationships (Rousseau, 1995). PCT is a reciprocating construct in terms of employer–employee remuneration and expectations (Rousseau, 1995). PCT frames the psychological contract as an individual cognitive and relational construct reflective of the perceived energy and attention levels within relationship exchanges (Rousseau, 1995). Employees expect employers to provide a productive and safe working environment that accentuates invigorating work and nurturing relationships. In return, employers expect workers to perform implicit and explicit productive work and be agents of workplace civility (Rousseau, 1995). PCT research on professional contractors and their psychological contract expectations and experiences, albeit it is limited in employment research, can reveal efficacy in employment relationship practices powering or diminishing organizational performance (Taylor et al., 2006). The current increase of professional contractual employment where theoretically, and prac-

tically, employer–contractor psychological relationships are forming was grounds for our deeper examination of the nature of the employer–professional contractor relationships. We analyzed the expectations, perceptions, and experiences of the relationships, and the effectiveness within the relational exchange influencing organizational performance (McKeown & Cochrane, 2012). The research question probing the investigation was what is the professional contractors’ experience and perception of the psychological contract efficacy in the employment relationship and how does that influence the individual’s performance for the organization?

## RESEARCH METHOD AND DESIGN

The central phenomenon in the study was to examine the experience of professional contractual workers hired by an organization to fill a human resource need. Exploratory and grounded research methods deemed best for this study reconnoitering perception of contractual workers’ psychological contract expectations in a U.S.-based private sector, a global organization that provides training and development products and services for a variety of customers, ranging from public sector organizations to international enterprises. At the time of the study, the company employed a total of 486 professional contractual employees.

Purposeful typical case sampling was used with 22 individuals participating in the interviews. Semi-structured interviews were used to obtain thick descriptions of the employee perception of the psychological contract. The interviews were conducted with participants through video conferencing software and recorded for data collection purposes. In the interviews and subsequent analysis, the researchers more deeply probed around the core themes of psychological contract fulfillment, psychological contract breach, and motivation. Participants were asked open-ended questions with the key intention to understand employee perspectives on the psychological contract fulfillment and breach and its influence on employee motivation.

Our interview guide was developed drawing on existing psychological contract research (Rousseau, 1995). At the beginning of each interview, the participant was told about the purpose of the study and assured confidentiality. The interviewees were asked to describe their view of the organization and the leadership in the organization concerning their engagement in work. Interviewees were probed with questions such as how they thought their employer was fulfilling the psychological contract obligations with engagement and what was not being fulfilled in the psychological contract obligations, how they felt about a

*As the gig economy continues to surge, this research is useful for employers as well as scholars and practitioners to better understand the importance of the contractual worker's psychological contract fulfillment in relation to the individual's performance and the resulting influence on the organization's performance.*

breach of the contract, and how the organization and leadership could improve the relationship with the employees. After each interview, the responses were documented and transcribed verbatim and imported into NVivo12 for data management and analysis.

### Coding and Managing Data

The analysis procedure followed template analysis, which combines elements of grounded theory approach and content analysis (King, 2012). Grounded theory assumes that the explanatory framework is developed through the process of analysis without a priori definition of codes, whereas content analysis assumes a coding frame based on a set of preconceived categories for which evidence is sought in the data. Template analysis in turn consists of some initial codes, which are revised over-and-over-again during the analysis (Chell, 1998). For this study, it was appropriate as the questions and theoretical background provided an initial set of codes, but the idiosyncratic nature of breach experiences discussed by participants demanded refinement of the coding frame.

The template is a collection of codes organized hierarchically, with groups of similar codes grouped to produce more general, higher-order codes. The initial template was developed based on the interview guide (e.g., identifying the psychological contract obligations, the fulfillment of the contract, and breaches of the contract) and each transcription was marked with the appropriate codes. Further development of the template proceeded with additional reading and analysis of the interview transcripts. When a relevant issue did not match any of the existing

*A clear expectation of the relationship between the employee and employer must be defined and established within the onset.*

*Organizations will benefit from not only clearly establishing the tasks and responsibilities of the contractual worker, they will also benefit from clearly establishing the relational components of those expectations.*

codes, a new code was added, which expanded the detail to the overall analysis. The central higher-order codes remained the same throughout the coding process; the lower-order codes went through further refinement. For example, breach of obligations constituted a higher-level code in the initial template. It was then extended to cover different types of breaches connected to each participants' interview.

### Results

Predominant codes were developed from analysis of the study participants' responses from the interviews of the psychological contract expectations (e.g., obligations), the fulfillment of the psychological contract, and the breaches of the psychological contract. The results reflect the participants lived experiences and perspectives about the contractual work with the organization.

### Psychological contract obligations

The employee's perspective of the psychological contract obligations fell into the following categories: supervisor support, peer networks, communication, and career advancement. Table 1 presents the code, short description, and quotes for the psychological contract obligations.

TABLE 1

## SUMMARY OF PSYCHOLOGICAL CONTRACT OBLIGATION CODES, SHORT DESCRIPTIONS, AND EXEMPLARY QUOTES

CODE	SHORT DESCRIPTION	EXEMPLARY QUOTE
Supervisor support	A leader–member relationship with the immediate supervisor	“I want to know who I can go to for questions. A clear line of supervision is needed.” “I want to know who I work for so I can know if I am doing what my boss thinks I should.”
Peer networks	Opportunity to build a relationship with others in the organization	“I want to work with others.” “I would like to have the chance to meet the full-time employees and understand what they do and their expertise.”
Communication	Communication from leaders and supervisors to the employee	“It is good to understand the big picture and how I fit into it. I think my boss should make that happen.” “There are constant changes. I want to know what those are and what it means.”
Career advancement	Opportunity to build skills and advance in the organization	“I want to advance my career. A form of career advancement would be nice.” “I understand I was hired for this specific job and it does not guarantee full-time. However, it is good to know how I could move into a full time position.”

### Supervisor Support

All the participants ( $n = 22$ ) identified a leader–member relationship as an obligation. A clear definition and identification of the supervisor were evident in every interview. A relationship with the supervisor was noted as a relational obligation in the contract.

### Peer Networks

Most of the participants ( $n = 18$ ) identified connections with their peers as an obligation of the psychological contract. The peer network was defined by the participant as opportunities to build relationships with others in the organization both in the department and outside of the employee's department.

### Communication

Communication was identified ( $n = 19$ ) as a necessary obligation of the leader, supervisor, and the organization. Overall, the lack of communication was noted in the interviews.

### Career Advancement

The opportunity to further develop skills leading to career advancement was identified ( $n = 14$ ). A perceived obligation of the psychological contract with the organization was to provide opportunities for the employees to build their skills and identify pathways to advance their careers.

### Fulfillment of psychological contract

The fulfillment of the psychological contract was found to be driven by the employees' connection to the organiza-

tion's brand, purpose, and customers. Table 2 presents the code, short description, and quotes for the fulfillment of the psychological contract.

### Brand Affinity

Belief in the organization's brand defined through the delivery of products and services was ( $n = 22$ ) the largest factor of the employees' perception of the fulfillment of the psychological contract.

### Purpose Driven

A connection to the purpose of the organization as a driver of perceived psychological contract fulfillment ( $n = 22$ ).

### Customer Service

The connection to the customers served was noted in all of the interviews ( $n = 22$ ). A strong connection to customers and the products delivered to the customers by the employees was deemed valuable and worthy of devoted work engagement and brand affinity. The customers were identified as a catalytic agent of the employees' connection to the organization.

### Psychological Contract Breach

The perceived psychological contract breach referred to the "cognition that one's organization has failed to meet one or more obligations within one's psychological contract in a manner commensurate with one's contributions," (Morrison & Robinson, 1997, p. 230). Breaches of the psychological contract were found as marginalization, lack of communication, and underutilization. Table 3

TABLE 2 SUMMARY OF PSYCHOLOGICAL CONTRACT FULFILLMENT CODES, SHORT DESCRIPTIONS, AND EXEMPLARY QUOTES		
CODE	SHORT DESCRIPTION	EXEMPLARY QUOTE
Brand affinity	Employee belief in the brand as defined by the product and service being delivered to customers	"When I tell others where I work, it is highly regarded, and I feel proud to work for such an organization." "The products and services I provide for my customers help them do their work and advance."
Purpose driven	Employee connection to the overall organization purpose	"I am proud of what [organization] does for the [type of customer served]." "What is done overall in this business is what I am happy to be a part of."
Customer service	Employee connection with the customers	"The interaction with my customers is what I enjoy the most in my work." "I am constantly working to improve my relationship with the customer and find ways to improve the service I provide for the customer."

TABLE 3 SUMMARY OF PSYCHOLOGICAL CONTRACT BREACH CODES, SHORT DESCRIPTIONS, AND EXEMPLARY QUOTES		
CODE	SHORT DESCRIPTION	EXEMPLARY QUOTE
Marginalization	Employee feeling of no participation in organization operations, decision-making, and connections to other areas of the organization	"We are not part of any decision that impacts our work, nor will we be." "We are not considered important in the organization especially since we are often ignored."
Lack of communication	Little to no communication from immediate supervisors and the leaders in the organization	"There is no communication from my supervisor. This interview is the first communication I've had." "I do not know what changes or how the changes impact me. I do not receive any updates or communications."
Underutilization	Employee does not believe their advanced skill and knowledge is being utilized in the organization	"I have skills that can be utilized more in my work and possibly in other areas of the organization." "I have new certifications and degrees but have no idea who to tell or even if my new skills will be valued."

presents the code, short description, and quotes for the psychological contract breaches.

### Marginalization

The feeling of marginalization was evident in the data from the interviews ( $n = 18$ ). Participants felt they had no participation in various activities within the organization; nor, did they feel invited to participate. The sample in this study represented the largest group of employees in the organization, yet the theme of marginalization perceived by the interviewees usurped any kinship the employees' felt toward the organization. Marginalization occurs when a group of employees are treated as invisible and is often a result of systemic actions to alienate groups by isolating them from the main activities and contributions of the organization (Bouwen, 2008). The findings from the inter-

views show how the participants identified as marginalized in the organization.

### Lack of Communication

Communication was found to be limited and almost non-existent in the participants' perspectives ( $n = 18$ ). The overall uncertainty around the organization and leaders was evident in the interviews and a need for more clearly defined structures to connect employees to supervisors and leadership.

### Underutilization

Participants expressed the want for greater utilization of their expertise in the organization; especially in the science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) areas. Results from the interviews indicated feelings of

underutilization ( $n = 17$ ). This was defined in the interviews as deficient recognition and use of employee specialized skills by leaders and the organization.

## DISCUSSION

The results of this study indicated that professional contractors, though their work was contingent, preferred to be connected relationally to leaders and the organization as a sense of belonging. Fulfillment of the psychological contract through transactional domains was prevalent in the participants' statements while breaches in the psychological contract were found in the relational domains. The psychological contract represented the professional contractors' beliefs and perceptions about implicit promises and obligations between them and the employer (Rousseau, 2001). The unfulfilled obligations were noted to be in the realms of supervisor support, peer network opportunities, communication, and career advancement. While the obligations of the psychological contract were perceived to be relationship dominant, the fulfillment of the psychological contract perceived by the participants was mainly rooted in transactional domains focused on the job tasks and responsibilities. The noted tasks that drew affinity with the brand, high regard for the products and services, and energy used to secure customer satisfaction were elements of the transactional domain since the responsibilities were mainly task focused.

The psychological contract breach themes that emerged from the findings were connected to the relationship domains except for underutilization. All of the participants in this study were classified as professional contract workers hired specifically for their elite skills to supplement work in an organization (Kosanovich, 2018). The theme of underutilization of this sample of professional contractual workers signals a psychological breach of contract from the workers' perception. The underutilization theme led to the question if an employer perceives the contract workers' skills and expertise are more important than fostering a relationship as can happen with permanent employees. The question considers the human need for socialization regardless of employment status (Millward & Brewerton, 1999).

Marginalization and lack of communication as themes in the psychological contract breach section of our study were connected to the relationship domain of good faith and fair dealings (Rousseau & Tijoriwala, 1996). The themes directly show the perceived obligations of supervisor support, peer networks, and communication by the professional contractor as unfulfilled. The marginalization reported by the professional contractors resonated through their statements about feelings of isolation, un-

supportive leadership, and a lack of communication. The participants' heuristic interview statements indicated they felt their work was just as integral if not more to the success of the organization satiating a need for consistent leadership interaction, yet the interaction was missing. The participants' description of the missing leadership interaction created feelings of being an expendable worker whose value to the organization at the individual contribution level was marginal to organizational leaders or human resource personnel (Cable et al., 2013).

Contractual employees and the contingent workforce desire meaningful employment relationships as an organizational member (Taylor et al., 2006) which is evidenced in the perceptions of the participants in this study. The findings from this study may indicate that the expectations of psychological relationships with people of contractual status may not be realistic to the contractual worker or leadership though people in general desire healthy relational interactions. Given the gig economy, fostering an increase in the contractual workforce has highlighted the contract worker as a short-term employee that complements the lean organization, how the employer or organization perceives the relationship expectations may greatly differ from the contractors' perceptions.

## IMPLICATIONS

Academic and practical implications arose with the findings of our study. As an early entrant into the study of the professional contractual employee experience and relationship with the employer, our findings provide evidence necessary to expand the theory and study of psychological contracts. The professional contractual worker is a member of a growing type of worker within the expansion of the global workforce. The changes in the workforce as a result of the gig economy push the need to also expand PCT and study beyond the full-time or permanent employee; especially in terms of needs, expectations, and engagement.

The practical implications are abundant as this study is one of the few focused on professional contractor's perception of the psychological contract. Our study results indicated that people, no matter their employment status, desire rich organizational relationships. Organizations will benefit from not only establishing the tasks and responsibilities of the contractual worker, they will also benefit from clearly establishing the relational expectations. For example, the participants in this study believed their specialized skills were marginalized, yet the nature of hiring professional contracts is mostly transactional with minimum recognition of specialized skills being an organizational priority (McKeown & Cochrane, 2012).

## FUTURE STUDIES

This exploratory research into the contractual workers' experience with the organization warrants further studies to expand the understanding of contractual workers' perceptions of the relationship between them and employers. The same approach in interviewing contractual workers should be used to build and expand the PCT beyond full-time and permanent employees. Studying contractual worker perspective of expectations and the establishment of the psychological contract with organizational leaders can provide more insight on psychological contract obligations and expectations in the global workforce. Expanding the research design to include quantitative measures of the psychological contract fulfillment and its influence on job satisfaction and organizational commitment is also needed as a complement to the qualitative measures.

## LIMITATIONS

With little prior studies on the contractual worker experience, this early entrant is mainly exploratory. The generalizability of the results is limited given the case study nature of this research. The participants in this study were all employed at the same organization which influences the psychological contract expectations as such are grounded within contextual factors. The findings of this study are also cross-sectional as the data were collected at one point in time and not multiple times or longitudinally. Many elements were not controlled for in this study. Future studies with greater control factors are needed within additional organizations to further understanding.

## CONCLUSION

The rapid growth in contractual workers warrants greater attention to this group of vital organizational workers. The understanding of their social and psychological needs can arm practitioners and scholars with vital information about organizational relational behavior and development. Clearly defined expectations of the contractual worker and employers are of utmost importance to the psychological contract formation and mode. Driven largely by task or transactional motivations, the psychological contract can center on those expectations to maximize the contractual worker's performance which then can also maximize the organization's overall performance.

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