



Beyond the Job Description: How Psychological Contract Breach and Illegitimate Tasks Affect Employee Productivity and Well-Being

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Abstract: A startup is a newly established entrepreneurial venture that typically focuses on a limited range of products to streamline operations while driving meaningful and socially beneficial outcomes. While agility, disruption, and innovation are characteristic of startups, they often face significant challenges due to resource constraints, flat hierarchies, and direct founder involvement. Young professionals, eager to develop new skills and gain experience, are drawn to start-ups with varied expectations regarding job roles, career growth, and mentoring opportunities. However, the volatile work environment often leads to unmet expectations, contributing to psychological contract breaches, a perception that one's implicit or explicit agreement with the employer has been violated. Additionally, employees are assigned illegitimate tasks; tasks that often fall outside one's occupational role. These tasks are perceived as unreasonable and often unnecessary by the employees leading to significant work stress, job dissatisfaction, and burnout, ultimately affecting employee well-being and productivity. This chapter provides an in-depth review of the psychological and organizational consequences of psychological contract breaches and illegitimate tasks. It further examines the role of risk factors and personal resources in shaping employee perceptions of these challenges.

Keywords: *Psychological contract breach, Illegitimate tasks, Work-related stressors, Job satisfaction, Employee well-being*

1. Introduction

The economy of every nation relies upon its business activities. Today, these activities have progressed beyond mere transactions and applications. Startups are emerging as key drivers of economic growth, innovation, disruption, and job creation. A startup can be defined “as a new business venture based mostly on technology and digitalization, founded in light of emerging market opportunities” (Ahmad et al., 2023). India has firmly established itself as having the third-largest startup ecosystem in the world (David et al., 2021). While their flat hierarchies, flexible structures, and high growth opportunities attract young professionals, these organizations often face significant challenges that may eventually impact employee well-being. Some of these challenges include an absence of psychological contracts between the employees and the employers (Wang et al., 2017) and poorly defined work tasks that eventually lead to dissatisfaction, disengagement, and high turnover rates (Ahmad et al., 2023).

2. Review of Literature

2.1 Psychological Contracts: Types, Breaches, and Outcomes

A psychological contract is an individual's perception regarding reciprocal obligations between the employee and the employer (Rogozińska-Pawelczyk, 2020). The theory of Psychological Contracts finds its roots in Social Exchange Theory (Blau, 1964). These perceived obligations are established during the nascent phases of development of the said contract and a comparison is made along the lines of what had been promised and what is actually being fulfilled (Topa et al., 2022). Companies expect their employees to be productive and contribute optimally to their development, while the employees expect their company to ensure that their contribution is being optimally compensated and their well-being and career growth are being prioritized (Ahmad et al., 2023). A psychological contract is unwritten in nature and positively affects organizational commitment (Ahmad et al., 2023). There are various indicators that define the psychological foundation of an employee's relationship with their company, how they perceive their role, commitments, and trust in the organization (Botha & Steyn, 2021). These indicators include,

Transactional contract: A short-term, financial agreement where employees expect fair compensation for their work without engaging in a long-term contract (Costa & Coyle, 2021).

Relational contract: A long-term, symbiotic, trust-based relationship where employees expect loyalty, career growth, and job security (Costa & Coyle, 2021).

Balance contract: A mix of transactional and relational, where employees seek both fair compensation and professional development (Rousseau, 1995).

Dynamic Performance: Expectation that both the employee and the employer will maintain flexibility in roles and responsibilities, and adapt to changes.

Mistrust: A breach of mutual expectations, leading to scepticism, reduced work engagement, and turnover intention.

A psychological contract breach occurs when one party believes that the other has not sufficiently upheld its commitments and obligations. This perception can lead to a sense of violation, marked by intense negative emotions like frustration, distress, and feelings of betrayal (Schalk & Rousseau, 2000). A 'violation' refers to a strong emotional reaction that can occur when an individual feels that their organization has not properly honoured the psychological contract (Morrison & Robinson, 1997). A wide range of studies have been conducted to understand the outcome of such breaches and violations. Some have explored the consequences of breaches on employees who do not eventually abandon the firm (Tomprou et al., 2015), while others have found an impact of such violations on employee attitudes and behaviour (Pate et al., 2003), performance and work-related outcomes (Zhao et al., 2007).

Pate et al. (2003) studied the impact of psychological contract violation on the attitudes and behaviours of employees. They identified three causes of violation, distributive, procedural, and interactional justice. Distributive justice was found to be highly correlated with job satisfaction and affective commitment, indicating that fair resource distribution increases employee affinity towards the organization. Procedural justice was statistically linked to loyalty and job satisfaction, as the consistency of procedures fosters a sense of fairness, which in turn strengthens trust and commitment. However, Procedural justice is negatively correlated to cynicism suggesting that when employees perceive unfairness in organizational processes, they may develop distrust and skepticism leading to disengagement and negative attitude toward the organization. Lastly, interactional justice influences workplace attitudes, with co-worker relationships fostering cynicism due to group norms, while strong management relationships enhance affective commitment through trust and management visibility. The study laid great

emphasis on the importance of contextual factors in studying psychological contracts and their effects.

Zhao et al. (2007) conducted a meta-analysis based on random-effects methods and found that psychological contract breaches influenced eight work-related outcomes. A strong positive correlation was discovered between breach and feelings of managerial mistrust ($p = -.65$) violation ($p = -.52$), and turnover intention ($p = -.42$). Breach was also found to be negatively correlated with organizational commitment ($p = -.38$), job satisfaction ($p = -.54$). The study further found that contract breach was negatively correlated with in-role performance and organizational citizenship behaviour (OCB), a form of context-based performance involving voluntary and beneficial actions that go beyond formal job responsibilities. The only outcome that breach was found to be unrelated to actual turnover ($p = -.06$). This study offers valuable insights into psychological contracts, highlighting their significance in understanding employment relationships and their impact on various work-related outcomes.

Tomprou et al. (2015) developed a Post-Violation Model (PVM) to explain how employees respond to psychological contract breaches and violations when they choose to remain with their employer. Their model highlights different pathways employees may take in response to a breach, depending on their perception of whether the violation can be resolved and how quickly corrective actions are taken. The model outlines four possible outcomes:

Psychological contract reactivation: The employee restores the original contract, maintaining trust and commitment.

Psychological contract thriving: The employee forms a revised, more beneficial contract, thereby, strengthening work engagement.

Psychological contract impairment: The employee accepts a less favourable contract, resulting in lower expectations and commitment.

Psychological contract dissolution: The employee remains in a state of unresolved violation, leading to emotional detachment, disengagement, and possible exit from the organization.

A key factor in determining these outcomes is the employee's 'perceived likelihood of violation resolution' – if they believe that the employer is responsive and willing to repair the breach, they are more likely to adapt positively. The Post Violation Model provides a nuanced

understanding of how psychological contract breaches shape employee behaviour over time by highlighting the importance of organizational responsiveness and trust restoration.

Zhao et al. (2007) found certain moderators for contract breaches. One such moderator is the content of the psychological contract itself. Transactional contracts are usually legally binding written contracts, thus reducing the likelihood of a breach. Such breaches strongly affect organizational commitment but do not affect job satisfaction and turnover intentions to that extent. Work ideologies also impact psychological contracts as different occupations have different kinds of contracts.

Given that startup companies rely on innovation and creativity to deliver quality services and products, ensuring a supportive work environment is essential. Furthermore, factors such as employee branding and a conducive work environment along with a well-maintained psychological contract influence organizational commitment, ultimately reducing turnover intention (Ahmad, 2023).

2.2 Illegitimate Tasks

Illegitimate tasks refer to work assignments that employees perceive as unjustified, unnecessary, and beyond the scope of their job role. These tasks violate professional norms and expectations, causing employees to feel undervalued and disrespected (Semmer et al., 2010). These tasks can be categorized into two forms; a) unreasonable tasks, which are beyond an employee's designated responsibilities, and b) unnecessary tasks, which lack clear purpose and are often perceived as redundant (Semmer et al., 2019). Both contribute to occupational stress, lower job satisfaction and diminished organizational commitment.

Tasks that are irrelevant or lack professional significance can diminish an employee's sense of meaningful work by undermining their professional identity (Semmer et al., 2019; Kilponen et al., 2021). The Stress-as-Offense-to-Self (SOS) theory posits that individuals experience stress when their self-esteem is threatened, making it a central factor in stress perception. Excessive workloads, conflicting responsibilities, and unclear job expectations can act as barriers to effective performance, leading to frustration and disengagement. When employees fail to meet their performance standards, they may experience a threat to self-worth (Iqbal et al., 2025).

According to the Job demands-resources model, working conditions can be categorized into two categories; job demands and job resources. The former becomes difficult when

employees are expected to perform tasks that exceed their capabilities leading to heightened stress. Job resources include physical, psychological, social, and organizational factors and play a crucial role in supporting an employee's personal and professional development (Bakker et al., 2007). Illegitimate tasks can be categorized as additional job demands and can drain employees' physical and psychological resources, thereby, making workload management difficult (Iqbal et al., 2025). These tasks can also negatively impact work attitudes and behaviours, further contributing to job dissatisfaction and reduced engagement (Ahmed et al., 2018).

Iqbal et al. (2025) examined the antecedents and consequences of illegitimate tasks in workplace settings. They found that these tasks contribute to occupational stress, emotional exhaustion, job burnout, and workplace ostracism, where employees feel excluded and undervalued. Additionally, employees may experience irritability, frustration, and lower self-esteem, often leading to disengagement from work. Employees demonstrate higher work procrastination and lower job satisfaction (Wang & Zong, 2023).

He et al. (2024) found a negative correlation between illegitimate tasks and creativity. Employee creativity involves the generation of new, practical, and impactful ideas that contribute to problem-solving and innovation within an organization. Illegitimate tasks thwart creativity by diverting an employee's time and cognitive resources away from meaningful, innovative work.

Van Niekerk et al. (2021) identified several behavioural consequences of illegitimate tasks. Employees often experience impatience and frustration as they struggle to balance personal responsibilities and work due to illegitimate tasks, leading to strained interpersonal relationships. Occupational stress has been linked to both physical and mental health challenges, with studies indicating that illegitimate tasks pose a significant risk to employee well-being (Semmer et al., 2021). Werdecker and Esch (2021) have found a strong and stable correlation between illegitimate tasks and burnout. These tasks have been found to negatively impact an employee's mental health (Kilponen et al., 2021; Mihelič et al., 2024) and overall life satisfaction (Werdecker & Esch, 2021).

Iqbal et al. (2025), identified some of the moderators in relation to employee perception of illegitimate tasks. The study found that emotional support and positive interpersonal relationships among colleagues can act as a buffer against the perception of depletion in self-control resources. Engaging in leisure activities can help alleviate work stress, improve interpersonal relationships, and enhance involvement in the workplace (Zong et al., 2022).

Psychological detachment has been recognized as a crucial coping mechanism for managing increased job demands and managing exhaustion aiding in psychological recovery and sustaining well-being (Mihelič et al., 2024). Leadership plays an important role in moderating the effects of illegitimate tasks. Authoritative leadership plays a positive role and benevolent leadership reduces procrastinating behaviour among employees that might arise due to illegitimate tasks (Wang & Zong, 2023).

3. Conclusion

In the evolving landscape of startups, where adaptability and innovation are the cornerstones of success, the impact of illegitimate tasks and psychological contract breaches cannot be overlooked. These stressors do more than just disrupt workflow, they shape the very foundation of employee-employer relationships. When tasks extend beyond professional boundaries and implicit agreements are broken, the effects go beyond short-term dissatisfaction, impacting the organization's long-term stability.

Moreover, psychological contracts play a crucial role in fostering trust and engagement. When these implicit agreements are violated, employees experience frustration, reduced motivation, and a weakened sense of loyalty to the organization.

Organizations must recognise the significance of fair task allocation and transparent communication to preserve trust and commitment among employees. By promoting fairness in procedures and interactions, minimising excessive job demands, and cultivating a supportive workplace, organizations can lessen the negative impact of illegitimate tasks while strengthening psychological contracts.

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