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Ambition at work and career satisfaction: The mediating role of taking charge behavior and the moderating role of pay

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# Ambition at work and career satisfaction

Ambition at  
work and  
career  
satisfaction

## The mediating role of taking charge behavior and the moderating role of pay

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### Abstract

**Purpose** – The purpose of this paper is to examine the moderating role of pay in the relationship between employee ambition and taking charge behavior, and its subsequent effects on employee career satisfaction.

**Design/methodology/approach** – A two-wave quantitative investigation was conducted among alumni of a large public university in the Netherlands.

**Findings** – The results show that taking charge behavior mediates the positive relationship between employee ambition and career satisfaction. They also show that pay positively moderates this mediation, such that the relationship between employee ambition and taking charge behavior is stronger when ambitious employees receive an increase in pay, leading to increased career satisfaction. Conversely, a decrease in pay does not moderate ambitious employees' taking charge behavior and the impact on their career satisfaction.

**Research limitations/implications** – The study draws on self-report data collected in one country: the Netherlands.

**Practical implications** – The study highlights the importance of pay for higher job involvement, demonstrating its impact on taking charge behavior among employees with higher levels of ambition.

**Originality/value** – This is the first empirical study to examine the impact of pay on employees' taking charge behavior and the subsequent implications for career satisfaction.

**Keywords** Ambition, Career satisfaction, Pay, Taking charge

**Paper type** Research paper

Proactive work behaviors, such as taking charge (Fuller and Marler, 2009), job crafting (Plomp *et al.*, 2016), and networking (Tschopp *et al.*, 2015) are central themes in the contemporary careers and organizational psychology literature. With a shift of responsibility for careers away from organizations to individuals, employees are increasingly called to take ownership of their own work and life experiences (Arthur *et al.*, 2017). There is also increasing positive recognition for exhibiting ambition in their work context – previously considered a negative individual trait (Larimer *et al.*, 2007; Pettigrove, 2007). Indeed, employee ambition is now regularly associated with increased work performance (Huang *et al.*, 2014) and career satisfaction (Judge and Kammeyer-Mueller, 2012).

Yet, we still know very little about the mechanisms that explain the positive relationship between employee ambition and career satisfaction. From a management perspective, for example, there is a paucity of understanding about what managers can do to help employees



to fulfill their ambition and which management practices, such as pay, facilitate this relationship (see e.g. Akhtar *et al.*, 2015; Chng and Wang, 2015). This paper will contribute to the contemporary careers and compensation literature, therefore, by investigating this relationship. Specifically, we propose that taking charge behavior is an important mediator of the relationship between employee ambition and career satisfaction. We also propose that pay moderates this mediated relationship, such that after a pay increase ambitious employees will be more likely to engage in taking charge behavior. We also propose that this interaction will increase their subsequent career satisfaction.

The arguments presented in this paper are predicated on two key themes: taking charge behavior and pay. Taking charge behavior can be best understood as “voluntary and constructive efforts, by individual employees, to effect organizationally functional change with respect to how work is executed within the contexts of their jobs, work units, or organizations” (Morrison and Phelps, 1999, p. 403). A key component of this type of behavior is that it is change-oriented and innovative, triggering employees to be more adaptive, to learn and to develop their workplace competencies (Grant and Ashford, 2008). As a result, they are also likely to be better at understanding their job and work environment and at managing their own careers, thus resulting in increased career satisfaction (Taber and Blankemeyer, 2015). At the same time, however, organizations also stand to benefit from employees’ taking charge behavior given its positive impact on employee performance and career satisfaction (Vadera *et al.*, 2013).

Turning now to pay, we understand pay as a management practice that is used to direct employees’ attention and effort to achieve improved performance. Indeed, pay has been found to be effective in influencing employee work behaviors such as risk taking (a concept similar to taking charge behavior), thereby enhancing overall firm performance (Chng and Wang, 2015). It is also an effective management practice for increasing employee career satisfaction (Judge *et al.*, 2010). However, despite these ostensibly positive findings, according to recent research (e.g. Chng and Wang, 2015), the previously assumed positive effects of pay need to be explored more fully. For example, the extent to which pay has a positive effect on work performance and career satisfaction depends on who is being paid (Wowak and Hambrick, 2010). In other words, individual characteristics influence the effectiveness of pay, and one of those individual characteristics is ambition (Chng and Wang, 2015).

Our interest in the effects of taking charge behavior and pay on the relationship between employee ambition and career satisfaction is premised on two main arguments. First, that ambition, defined as a middle-level variable leading to generalized striving for success, attainment, and accomplishment (Judge and Kammeyer-Mueller, 2012, p. 759), triggers employees to engage in taking charge behavior. Prior work has shown that employees with higher levels of ambition actively engage in a wide range of proactive career behaviors, including taking charge (Barrick *et al.*, 2013) because of their need for more responsibility and influence over their work (Morrison and Phelps, 1999). Extending this line of enquiry further, we argue that by engaging in more taking charge behavior, they will also experience greater career satisfaction. This argument signals the extent to which taking charge may have a mediating effect, echoing the work of others who have demonstrated a positive relationship between proactive behaviors and career success (e.g. De Vos *et al.*, 2009; Forret and Dougherty, 2004).

Second, we argue that pay strategies may also support taking charge behavior among employees with higher levels of ambition thus impacting on their subsequent career satisfaction (i.e. creating a moderated mediated effect). As noted above, extant literature supports this argument where pay has been shown to have a positive impact on employees’ work behavior and attitudes (Gupta and Shaw, 2014; Chng and Wang, 2015) and career satisfaction (Judge *et al.*, 2010). Therefore, we propose that an increase in pay will positively influence ambitious employees’ taking charge behavior and subsequent career satisfaction,

while a decrease in pay is unlikely to affect the relationship, thus displaying a boundary condition. Commencing from these two arguments, then, the paper aims to answer the following research questions:

*RQ1.* How does pay influence the relationship between employee ambition and taking charge behavior?

*RQ2.* What is the effect of this interaction on employees' subsequent career satisfaction?

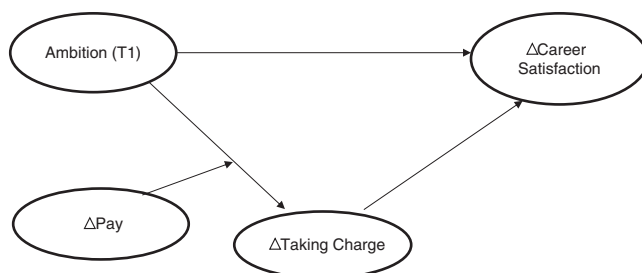
Having introduced the key objectives of the paper, we turn now to our research hypotheses. Since our hypothesized relationships involve an increase in taking charge behavior and career satisfaction (i.e. a positive change), we base our analysis on two-wave data with a one-year time lag. Figure 1 displays our research model graphically.

### Theoretical background

#### *Employee ambition and career satisfaction: the mediating role of taking charge behavior*

In the earlier literature, career satisfaction was understood as “an individual’s internal apprehension and evaluation of his or her career, across any dimensions that are important to that individual” (Van Maanen, 1977, p. 9). Although this classic definition is still influential, more recent work has incorporated a stronger sense of dynamism and the extent to which career satisfaction is impacted by personality and other variables (e.g. Abele and Spurk, 2009; Joo and Ready, 2012). Employee ambition is one of the personality variables that has been shown to have an especially positive effect on career satisfaction (Judge and Kammeyer-Mueller, 2012) and is thus a central theme in this paper.

Judge and Kammeyer-Mueller (2012) conceptualize ambition as a middle-level personality variable (McAdams, 1995; McAdams and Pals, 2006) that concerns how individuals express their personality within a given context (Judge and Kammeyer-Mueller, 2012) and that directly affects behavior to a greater extent than abstract or decontextualized personality traits (Cantor, 1990). As such, it impacts on the “things that individuals do with their personality traits (i.e. conscientiousness, openness to learning, sociability, extraversion and neuroticism) in a context” (Judge and Kammeyer-Mueller, 2012, p. 760). For this reason we expect that the positive relationship between ambition and career satisfaction (Judge and Kammeyer-Mueller, 2012) is likely to be influenced and/or facilitated by other individual and contextual variables. Indeed, a recent review paper by Li *et al.* (2014) identified a set of mediating variables (i.e. leadership, autonomy, empowerment, self-efficacy, social relationships, etc.) and a set of moderating variables (i.e. job autonomy, job complexity, job and social characteristics, etc.) that facilitate the relationship between personality variables and subsequent career outcomes. Extending this line of thinking, in this paper we demonstrate that taking charge behavior is another mediating variable that can be used to explain why ambitious employees experience greater career satisfaction. We present the rationale behind this argument next.



**Figure 1.**  
Research model

*Effects of taking charge behavior*

One example of taking charge behavior is where employees offer suggestions to identify a business opportunity or to improve a situation relating to their work responsibilities and expectations (Fuller *et al.*, 2007). The key issue here is that this type of behavior improves specific work situations or events and allows employees to proactively shape their careers in accordance with their own values and aspirations (Fuller and Marler, 2009). In this regard, it clearly aligns with the self-determination theory which suggests that individuals have basic human needs and set goals in life in order to achieve those needs (Deci and Ryan, 2000, p. 517). Indeed, this theory is especially salient for ambitious employees who like to set their own career and life goals (Judge and Kammeyer-Mueller, 2012). Ambitious employees are growth oriented and are therefore likely to engage in taking charge behaviors to achieve their maximum potential (Roche and Haar, 2013).

Greenberg *et al.* (2004) provide clear empirical evidence of this phenomenon. They show that ambitious employees tend to care about their personal work interests, and are therefore more likely to engage in taking charge behavior in order to achieve a greater sense of work significance. In turn, Barrick *et al.* (2013) show that highly extraverted, ambitious employees tend to feel a sense of significance about what they do and especially if they can take charge of their work context and responsibilities. Not surprisingly, therefore, employees with higher levels of ambition also strive to achieve higher organizational status (Judge and Kammeyer-Mueller, 2012) and are thus also more likely to engage in specific leadership activities such as taking charge behavior and displaying personal initiative (Barrick *et al.*, 2002, 2013). By engaging in taking charge behavior, ambitious employees are also more likely to learn and develop their workplace competencies (Grant and Ashford, 2008). Indeed such outcomes are especially important to ambitious employees, because they facilitate the knowledge and skill development required for future higher positions (Metz, 2005). Thus, drawing the extant literature on this topic together we propose the following hypothesis:

*H1. Employee ambition (T1) is related to increased taking-charge behavior.*

We also argue that engaging in taking charge behavior will help employees with higher levels of ambition to increase their career satisfaction. Indeed, prior research indicates that proactive work behavior such as taking charge is positively related to subjective career outcomes such as career satisfaction (Seibert *et al.*, 1999). Likewise, Fuller and Marler (2009) argue that employees who take the initiative to advance in their workplace are equally proactive with respect to their own career trajectories. These employees, for example, engage in career-development activities, such as career planning, skill development, and consultation with others (Seibert *et al.*, 2001), precisely because of their need for achievement (Thompson, 2005) and motivation to learn (Major *et al.*, 2006). Engaging in this kind of career-development activity has also been found to increase employee career satisfaction (e.g. De Vos *et al.*, 2011; Godshalk and Sosik, 2003). Thus, we propose the following hypothesis:

*H2. Taking charge mediates the relationship between employee ambition (T1) and career satisfaction.*

*The moderating role of pay in the relationship between employee ambition, taking charge behavior and career satisfaction*

Self-determination theory suggests that extrinsic rewards such as pay may have a negative effect on the intrinsic interest in a task or job, which ultimately demotivates employees from putting effort into their work (Deci and Ryan, 1985, 2000). This may be especially the case for ambitious employees if pay strategies are not used effectively. For instance, Trank *et al.* (2002) showed that high-performing ambitious employees with a history of social achievement (e.g. obtaining leadership positions) are particularly sensitive

to whether their performance is rewarded with above-average pay increases. Perceived failure to provide appropriate levels of pay, therefore, may have a negative impact on motivation at work. Similarly, Rynes *et al.* (2004) argue that when employees at the same company all receive similar “merit” increases despite noticeable differences in performance, it may have a demotivating effect on the subsequent work behaviors of high performers (Rynes *et al.*, 2004). Ambitious employees are likely to expect an increase in pay for their taking charge behavior, because engaging in such behavior tends to increase work performances (Kim *et al.*, 2015). By comparison, a decrease in pay is likely to demotivate them from engaging in more taking charge behavior. Thus, we propose the following:

*H3.* Pay moderates the relationship between employee ambition (T1) and increased taking charge behavior, with employee ambition having a stronger impact on taking-charge behavior when there is an increase in pay rather than a decrease.

*A moderated mediated effect.* Given our prediction that taking charge will mediate the relationship between employee ambition (T1) and career satisfaction (*H2*) and that pay will moderate the relationship between employee ambition (T1) and increased taking charge behavior (*H3*), by extension, we hypothesize that taking-charge behavior will offer a more viable explanation for the relationship between employee ambition (T1) and increased career satisfaction when there is an increase in pay rather than a decrease. In other words, we expect ambitious employees to engage in more taking charge behavior when they receive an increase in pay than a decrease. By engaging in more taking charge behavior, therefore, we predict that ambitious employees will be more satisfied with their careers. Thus, based on the above rationale, we integrate these two hypotheses into a new hypothesis:

*H4.* Pay moderates the extent to which taking charge behavior mediates the relationship between employee ambition (T1) and career satisfaction, with taking charge behavior being more likely to mediate this relationship when there is an increase in pay than when there is a decrease.

## Methods

### *Sample and procedure*

This paper draws on a study initiated in 2011 by a large public university in the Netherlands. The study is part of an ongoing longitudinal initiative to record graduates’ mobility, work attitudes, and career behavior on an annual basis. It examines concepts such as attitudes and conditions at work as well as career-related behavior and demographic factors. The data set includes alumni from both undergraduate and postgraduate programs from 1950 to 2012. To examine potential increases in career satisfaction and the mediated effect of taking charge behavior, data were collected in two phases with a one-year time lag. As part of the study, 2,000 business and economics graduates were invited to participate in a web-based survey. In total, 558 graduates returned completed questionnaires providing a response rate of 28 percent. After one year, a second survey was sent to the same participants, as well as to an additional 2,880 potential participants. For this follow-up survey, 555 graduates returned completed questionnaires providing a response rate of 11 percent. The response rate varied across time (T1 = 28 percent and T2 = 12 percent) because of the higher number of total potential participants in the follow-up study. In addition to normal attrition, the nonresponse analysis revealed that non-respondents tended to be retirees who had completed the survey in the first round only. Our selected sample ( $n = 181$ ) focuses on those participants who had completed the survey in both waves and who were employed at the time of the survey.

The final sample comprised 77.3 percent men, and was predominantly Dutch. The higher ratio of male respondents to women in this study reflects the current gender distribution among economics and business graduates in the Netherlands. The average age of

respondents was 37.7 years at T1 and 38.7 years at T2, with a median age of 35. They held a wide variety of management-level career positions in a variety of fields including consultancy, accounting, finance and banking, and other business and professional services.

### *Measures*

*Employee ambition.* The participants responded to five items from a scale developed by Gray and O'Brien (2007), such as "I hope to become a leader in my career field;" "When I am established in my career, I would like to manage other employees;" and "I hope to move up through any organization or business I work in" (1 = "strongly disagree," 5 = "strongly agree"). We averaged the item scores to generate the total scores for employee ambition (T1,  $\alpha = 0.77$ ; T2,  $\alpha = 0.78$ ).

*Taking charge.* Participants also completed Morrison and Phelps's (1999) ten-item scale for taking charge behavior. Each of the items was prefaced with "In my job, I often [...]" and read as follows: "[...] try to adopt improved procedures for performing my job;" "[...] try to correct a faulty procedure or practice;" and "[...] try to implement solutions to pressing organizational problems." They were invited to mark their response using a five-point scale ranging from 1, "I strongly disagree," to 5, "I strongly agree," with an option of "not applicable." We averaged the item scores to generate the total scores for taking charge (T1,  $\alpha = 0.91$ ; T2,  $\alpha = 0.91$ ).

*Career satisfaction.* Participants responded to four items from a scale developed by Turban and Dougherty (1994). Example items are "I am satisfied with the success I have achieved in my career so far" and "Given my age, my career is on or ahead of schedule." Participants were invited to indicate their response on a five-point scale ranging from 1, "I strongly disagree," to 5, "I strongly agree." We averaged the item scores to generate the total scores for career satisfaction (T1,  $\alpha = 0.82$ ; T2,  $\alpha = 0.86$ ).

*Current salary.* Participants completed one item for pay: "What is your current salary (gross/per month)?" For this item, they were invited to use a 21-point scale ranging from 1, "1,500 and less," to 21, "10,001 and more."

*Starting salary.* Participants completed one item for pay: "In which salary scale did you start with at your current employer (gross/per month)?" For this item, they were invited to use a 21-point scale ranging from 1, "500 and less," to 21, "10,001 and more."

*Control variables.* Past research shows that contextual factors provide an important explanation for the variance in career satisfaction (Joo and Ready, 2012). For example, if a job is perceived to be unsustainable due to excessive work hours, an employee is likely to experience career dissatisfaction (Huffman *et al.*, 2014). Work hours are also likely to be related to taking charge behavior (Morrison and Phelps, 1999). In addition to work hours, we controlled for availability of bonuses since prior work found that it influences individual work behavior and subsequent outcomes (Jansen *et al.*, 2009), thus it could also influence taking charge behavior and career satisfaction. We also controlled for age as this variable is related to career outcomes (Carless and Arnup, 2011). Following prior longitudinal research, we also controlled for availability of bonuses, designated work hours and age for T1 only (Tims *et al.*, 2015). These control variables were measured using one item. The item for availability of bonuses was "In the past few years, have you once or more received occasional supplement to your salary due to your performance at work (not including bonus for overtime hours). Please note that Holiday and Christmas bonuses are not included unless they are performance" (1 = no, 2 = yes). The item for work hours was: "How many hours per week do you actually work? Please specify number of hours per week (e.g. 40)." For this item, a scale was used ranging from 1 = 1 to 100 = 100.

### *Preliminary statistical analyses*

As a preliminary step, we conducted a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) to estimate the quality of our factor structure (Yang, 2005) and to assess the discriminant and convergent

validity of the indicators of the three constructs employee ambition, taking charge and career satisfaction for T1 and T2. As a result of the CFA, the overall measurement model indicated an acceptable fit to the data measured on T1 ( $\chi^2 = 286.304$ , TLI = 0.88, CFI = 0.90; RMSEA = 0.07) and on T2 ( $\chi^2 = 248.865$ , TLI = 0.91, CFI = 0.93; RMSEA = 0.06) (Hu and Bentler, 1999; Schumacker and Lomax, 2004). Additionally, Tables I and II indicate that the squared correlation between the combinations of each of the two constructs is less than the average variance extracted by the constructs, supporting the discriminant and convergent validity (Fornell and Larcker, 1981).

### Testing the hypotheses

We used Process (version 2.15) in IBM SPSS Statistics 24.0 to test our hypotheses. This software has been used in prior studies investigating a moderated-mediation model (e.g. Jawahar and Liu, 2016). To investigate the effects of the moderator pay on the relationship between employee ambition, increased taking charge behavior, and increased career satisfaction, we calculated change variables for taking charge, career satisfaction, and pay. We followed the recommendations of prior studies to calculate a change score consisting of standardized residual scores, by regressing T2 scores of each taking charge item and career satisfaction item on its corresponding T1 score (Consiglio *et al.*, 2016; Schaufeli *et al.*, 2009). To calculate the change variable for pay, we regressed the item of current salary on the item of starting salary (both received from the current employer). A positive residual score indicates an increase in the variables, whereas a negative residual change indicates a decrease. The use of residual scores avoids errors that might occur when the differences between items or scores are considered (Cronbach and Furby, 1970).

We tested *H1* and *H2* by using the mediation test in Process. Process conducts mediation analyses on the basis of bias-corrected confidence intervals derived from 5,000 bootstrapped estimates of each path (Hayes, 2009). Next, we tested *H3* by using the moderation test in Process. The moderation analysis was conducted by creating a product term for the moderator (employee ambition (T1)  $\times$  pay) (Aiken and West, 1991) and by using bias-corrected confidence intervals derived from 5,000 bootstrapped estimates (Hayes, 2009).

Finally, to test *H4*, which integrates *H2* and *H3* in a moderated-mediation model, we used the moderation-mediation test in Process. This test is in line with the procedures developed by Edwards and Lambert (2007). It examines the differences in the conditional

	Taking charge	Ambition	Career satisfaction
Taking charge	0.54		
Ambition	0.27	0.41	
Career satisfaction	0.03	0.17	0.55

**Notes:** Values on the diagonal are average variance extracted. The remaining values are the squared correlations between the constructs. The study variables are from time 1

**Table I.**  
Results of  
discriminant and  
convergent validity  
of time 1

	Taking charge	Ambition	Career satisfaction
Taking charge	0.51		
Ambition	0.13	0.45	
Career satisfaction	0.08	0.15	0.62

**Notes:** Values on the diagonal are average variance extracted. The remaining values are the squared correlations between the constructs. The study variables are from time 2

**Table II.**  
Results of  
discriminant and  
convergent validity  
of time 2



indirect effect of employee ambition (T1) on increased career satisfaction, through taking charge (at a high vs low moderator value) and on the basis of bias-corrected confidence intervals derived from the 5,000 bootstrapped estimates of each path (Hayes, 2009). As recommended by Aiken and West (1991), a high moderator value is defined as one standard deviation above the mean and thus represents in our case an increase in pay. On the other hand, a decrease in pay is represented by a low moderator value which is defined as one standard deviation below the mean.

**Results**

Descriptive statistics, internal consistency, and correlations for the study variables across waves are displayed in Table III. All of the study variables were positively correlated with one another, except for taking charge behavior (T1) and career satisfaction (T2) ( $r = 0.14, p > 0.05$ ), starting salary and employee ambition T1 and T2 ( $r = 0.05, 0.10; p > 0.05$ ) and starting salary and taking charge T1 and T2 ( $r = 0.06, 0.11; p > 0.05$ ). Furthermore, the control variable bonus was correlated with all study variables, except for taking charge behavior T1 and T2 ( $r = 0.15, 0.12, p > 0.05$ ) and starting salary ( $r = 0.03, p > 0.05$ ). The control variable work hours was only correlated with the variables employee ambition T1 and T2 ( $r = 0.29, 0.28; p < 0.01$ ) and current salary ( $r = 0.26, p < 0.01$ ). Finally, the control variable age was correlated with current salary ( $r = 0.50, p < 0.01$ ), starting salary ( $r = 0.21, p < 0.01$ ) and taking charge behavior (T2) ( $r = 0.23, p < 0.01$ ).

Table IV summarizes our findings reflecting the direct relationships between our study variables. The results show that the predictor employee ambition (T1) is linked with increased career satisfaction ( $b = 0.15, p < 0.05$ ), which confirms that the main relationship of our model is significant. Also the relationship between employee ambition and increased taking charge behavior proves to be significant ( $b = 0.15, p < 0.05$ ), thereby offering support for our first hypothesis.

Tables V and VI show the results of our mediation H2. Table V shows that when career satisfaction change is included in the analysis as a dependent variable and when taking charge change (mediator) and employee ambition (T1) are included as independent variables, employee ambition (T1) decreases in significance and becomes almost insignificant ( $b = 0.18, p = 0.046$ ), while the mediator taking charge change becomes significant ( $b = 0.21, p < 0.01$ ), which indicates that there is a mediation effect (Baron and Kenny, 1986). Indeed, Table VI

Variable	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
1. Bonus	1.66	0.48											
2. Work hours	43.66	9.83	0.11										
3. Age	37.67	9.51	0.07	-0.11									
4. Current salary	11.88	4.99	0.31**	0.26**	0.50**								
5. Starting salary	3.54	1.54	0.03	0.11	0.21**	0.52**							
6. Ambition (T1)	3.73	0.66	0.19*	0.29**	-0.13	0.15*	0.05	(0.77)					
7. Ambition (T2)	3.65	0.72	0.20**	0.28**	-0.10	0.28**	0.10	0.66**	(0.78)				
8. Taking charge (T1)	3.92	0.61	0.15	0.04	0.13	0.18*	0.06	0.44**	0.34**	(0.91)			
9. Taking charge (T2)	4.00	0.57	0.12	-0.01	0.23**	0.23**	0.11	0.30**	0.28**	0.63**	(0.91)		
10. Career satisfaction (T1)	3.74	0.64	0.31**	0.11	-0.06	0.35**	0.17*	0.29**	0.28**	0.15*	0.17*	(0.82)	
11. Career satisfaction (T2)	3.71	0.69	0.24**	0.12	0.02	0.42**	0.18*	0.27**	0.30**	0.14	0.24**	0.71**	(0.87)

**Notes:** Sample sizes for the correlations range from 174 to 181.  $\alpha$  internal consistency reliability coefficients appear on the main diagonal. Results are from a two-tailed test. \* $p < 0.05$ ; \*\* $p < 0.01$

**Table III.**  
Descriptive statistics and correlations among the study variables

shows that the indirect effect of taking charge (0.03) is significant with a 90 percent confidence interval of 0.0032-0.0962, thus offering support for *H2*.

Table VII shows the results relating to *H3*. As shown in the table, the relationship between employee ambition (T1) and increased taking charge is positively moderated by pay ( $b = 0.15$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ). Table VIII shows that the conditional estimates of employee

Ambition at work and career satisfaction

	Taking charge change	Career satisfaction change
Bonus	0.04	0.06
Work hours	-0.06	0.04
Age	0.18*	0.09
Ambition	0.15*	0.15*
$R^2$	0.06*	0.04*

**Notes:** Control variables and the independent variable employee ambition are from time 1. Regression coefficients are unstandardized values. Results are from a one-tailed test. \* $p < 0.05$

**Table IV.** Results of the regression analyses for direct relationships

	Career satisfaction change
Bonus	0.09
Work hours	0.00
Age	0.00
Ambition	0.18*
Taking charge change	0.21***
$R^2$	0.09***

**Notes:** All values were tested for significance using 90 percent bias-corrected confidence intervals from 5,000 bootstrapped intervals. Control variables and the independent variable employee ambition are from time 1. Regression coefficients are unstandardized values. Results are from a one-tailed test. \* $p < 0.05$ , \*\*\* $p < 0.01$

**Table V.** Mediation results with bootstrapping

	Career satisfaction change	90% confidence interval
Total effect of ambition	0.21	0.0634-0.3653
Direct effect of ambition	0.18	0.0321-0.3325
Indirect effect of taking charge change	0.03	0.0032-0.0962

**Notes:** All values were tested for significance using 90 percent bias-corrected confidence intervals from 5,000 bootstrapped intervals

**Table VI.** Total, direct, and indirect effect

	Taking charge change
Bonus	0.07
Work hours	-0.01
Age	0.01
Compensation	-0.54
Ambition	0.17*
Ambition $\times$ Pay	0.15*
$R^2$	0.08*

**Notes:** All values were tested for significance using 90 percent bias-corrected confidence intervals from 5,000 bootstrapped intervals. Regression coefficients are unstandardized values. Results are from a one-tailed test. \* $p < 0.05$

**Table VII.** Moderation results with bootstrapping

ambition (T1) on taking charge are only significant when the moderator is high (+1 SD,  $b = 0.31$ ) (90 percent confidence interval = 0.1023, 0.5257), but not when it is low (-1 SD,  $b = 0.02$ ) (90 percent confidence interval = -0.1658, 0.2061). Thus, indicating that only an increase in pay moderates the relationship between employee ambition (T1) and increased taking charge. Hence,  $H3$  is supported.

Finally, Tables IX and X summarize the results with respect to  $H4$ . Table IX shows that when change in pay is included as a moderator in the mediation analyses, taking charge still mediates the relationship between employee ambition (T1) and increased career satisfaction. Evidence stems from the predictor employee ambition (T1), which has become insignificant ( $b = 0.13$ ,  $p > 0.05$ ), while the mediator taking charge is significant ( $b = 0.21$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ) (Baron and Kenny, 1986). Analyses involving the direct measure of increased career satisfaction show that the conditional estimates of the indirect effect of employee ambition (T1) on increased career satisfaction, via taking charge, is not significant when the moderator is low (-1 SD,  $b = 0.004$ ) (90 percent confidence interval = -0.0270, 0.0574) but significant when it is high (+1 SD,  $b = 0.07$ ) (90 percent confidence interval = 0.0124, 0.1657). This indicates that only an increase in pay moderates the mediation effect of taking charge behavior in the relationship between employee ambition (T1) and increased career satisfaction. Thus,  $H4$  is supported.

**Table VIII.**  
Conditional effect at high vs low values of the moderator

Compensation	Taking charge change	90% confidence interval
Decrease in pay	0.02	-0.1658-0.2061
Increase in pay	0.31	0.1023-0.5257

**Note:** All values were tested for significance using 90 percent bias-corrected confidence intervals from 5,000 bootstrapped intervals

**Table IX.**  
Moderation/mediation results with bootstrapping

	Career satisfaction change
Bonus	-0.07
Work hours	-0.00
Age	-0.01
Compensation	0.61*
Ambition	0.13
Ambition × Pay	-0.10
Taking charge change	0.21**
$R^2$	0.15**

**Notes:** All values were tested for significance using 90 percent bias-corrected confidence intervals from 5,000 bootstrapped intervals; Regression coefficients are unstandardized values. Results are from a one-tailed test. \* $p < 0.05$ ; \*\* $p < 0.01$

**Table X.**  
Conditional indirect effect at high vs low values of the moderator on career satisfaction change

Compensation	Indirect effect	90% confidence interval
Decrease in pay	0.004	-0.0270-0.0574
Increase in pay	0.07	0.0124-0.1657

**Note:** All values were tested for significance using 90 percent bias-corrected confidence intervals from 5,000 bootstrapped intervals

## Discussion

This paper reports the extent to which pay moderates the relationship between employee ambition and taking charge behavior, and the subsequent interaction of this influence on employees' career satisfaction. The results from our two-wave longitudinal study of alumni of a large public university show that employee ambition is linked with increased taking charge behavior, which in turn increases career satisfaction. The mediation effect of taking charge is moderated by pay, such that only an increase in pay was found to have a significant moderating effect whereas a decrease in pay did not. In other words, our results indicate that ambitious employees engage in more taking charge behavior when they receive an increase in pay, which in turn increases their career satisfaction.

Taken together, these findings make two important empirical and theoretical contributions to the current careers literature, as well as to the compensation literature. First, they extend previous research on employee ambition by providing clear and more complete theoretical accounts for why employee ambition is related to an increase in career satisfaction. Echoing prior research on personality variables and work behavior (Colbert *et al.*, 2013), work outcomes (Hambrick, 2007), and proactive behavior (Seibert *et al.*, 2001), we identified taking charge behavior as an important mechanism explaining the link between employee ambition and an increase in career satisfaction. Our findings suggest that employees with higher levels of ambition use their proactive capabilities at work to engage in taking charge behavior, which in turn increases their career satisfaction. Whereas prior research has understood proactive behavior (e.g. Fuller and Marler, 2009; Seibert *et al.*, 2001) as a one-dimensional construct related to career satisfaction, this paper indicates that it is best understood as a more multi-dimensional and composite process involving different types of behavior, such as taking personal initiative and engaging in voice. Thus, we contend that a more nuanced understanding of proactive behavior should be incorporated into studies of the relationship between employee ambition and career satisfaction.

Second, we report that increased taking charge behavior has a stronger mediating effect when moderated by pay. Specifically, our results demonstrate that employees with higher levels of ambition are more likely to engage in taking-charge behavior when they receive an increase in pay (rather than a decrease), which subsequently increases their career satisfaction. This finding shows that there are indeed limits to the positive effects of pay as a motivator for employee behavior (e.g. Shipton *et al.*, 2006; Gottschalg and Zollo, 2007), which adds a more nuanced dimension to the contemporary compensation literature. In addition, this finding demonstrates that the relationship between pay and career satisfaction is more complex and dynamic than previously understood. Whereas extant work demonstrates that pay is positively correlated with overall job satisfaction (see meta-analysis of Judge *et al.*, 2010), our work identifies the influence of individual traits (such as employee ambition) and proactive work behaviors as important mechanisms explaining this relationship.

Finally, this paper also contributes to Huang *et al.*'s (2014) work by demonstrating that although ambition is an important predictor of employees' proactive behavior at work, it becomes a stronger predictor when combined with an increase in pay. However, because scholars suggest that the motivational effect of money is nonlinear across pay levels (Rynes *et al.*, 2004), more research is needed to investigate the effect of increases in pay on work behaviors for employees earning different salaries.

### *Study limitations and recommendations for future research*

While this study makes important contributions to the contemporary careers and compensation literature, it also has some limitations. First, use of a survey design could raise concerns about self-report bias. Although the longitudinal nature of our research

enhances the validity of our findings, we acknowledge that strong causal inferences may be problematic (Chen *et al.*, 2011). This concern is especially pertinent with regard to taking charge behavior, which is based on a self-reported measure (Love and Dustin, 2014). Hence, we recommend future researchers to use a longitudinal design with three waves of data collection and multiple sources of data to address concerns about causality and self-report bias. With three waves of data collection, our mediation model could be tested using a cross-lagged design in which the independent variable precedes the mediator in time, and in which the mediator precedes the dependent variable in time, thereby making it possible to distinguish between theoretical causes and their anticipated effects (e.g. Cole and Maxwell, 2003).

Moreover, our findings relate to highly educated employees (i.e. graduates) working in the Netherlands, which may not be generalizable to other cultural contexts. However, because our sample is relatively diverse in terms of job position, job field, and organizations, we do not believe that this limitation is a serious shortcoming. Other scholars may, nevertheless, consider examining the extent to which our findings can be replicated in cross-cultural research.

Future research may also consider investigating how changes in pay, caused by changes in employees' job positions, influence our research model. For example, an increase in pay could be associated with a promotion, whereas a decrease in pay could be the result of a demotion (i.e. a downward transition toward a lower job level), or a decrease in job authority in the employees' current position (Carson and Carson, 2007). In addition, decreases in pay may also be triggered by performance deficiencies or as a reaction to an economic downturn (Josten and Schalk, 2010). If the latter is the case, this could signal to ambitious employees that they have to improve their work performance by engaging in more taking charge behavior (Kim *et al.*, 2015), which could ultimately have a positive influence on their career-related outcomes.

#### *Practical implications*

From a practical point of view, this paper offers several important insights. Organizations looking to encourage positive change to their workforce and related performance outcomes are likely to need employees who take charge (Fuller *et al.*, 2007). Our findings demonstrate that managers should provide ambitious employees with opportunities to take more charge at work, since this increases their career satisfaction. This could be done by designing their jobs in such a way that they have access to more autonomy (Barrick *et al.*, 2013) and by creating work environments where taking initiative is encouraged and supported. We also recommend managers to use pay increases to encourage taking charge behaviors and increase career satisfaction of ambitious employees.

#### **Conclusion**

There is widespread evidence that contemporary workers are taking an increasingly active role in developing their own careers (e.g. De Vos *et al.*, 2009; Fuller and Marler, 2009). In this study, we found that employees can actively increase their career satisfaction by engaging in taking charge behavior. This is especially the case for ambitious employees. From a practical perspective, this finding signals how organizations might take a supportive role in enhancing ambitious employees taking charge behavior and, thus facilitate their subsequent career satisfaction. Specifically, the results of the study indicate that pay strategies can be used to facilitate ambitious employees' taking charge behavior and augment their subsequent career satisfaction. We anticipate that the findings reported here will also inspire scholars to further explore how other work behaviors explain the link between individual variables and career satisfaction, as well as investigating how other management practices might be used to positively influence that relationship.

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