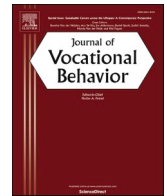


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Ambitious employees: Why and when ambition relates to performance and organizational commitment

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ABSTRACT

It is often assumed that ambition has important workplace outcomes, but empirical research has only partially addressed this issue and frequently relied on imprecise measures of ambition. In two studies, based on an improved measure of ambition as a general disposition, we clarified how, why, and when ambition relates to performance evaluations and organizational commitment outcomes. Study 1 suggests that ambition has significant reputation effects in that self-rated ambition was positively related to ambition rated by supervisors and spouse/life partners, based on 100 employee-supervisor-spouse/life partners triads. Moreover, supervisor-rated ambition, but not self-rated ambition, was significantly positively related to higher supervisor-rated job performance and promotability, beyond employee-rated proactivity and generalized self-efficacy. Study 2 focused on organizational commitment outcomes with a three-month time-lagged study with 194 employees. We found that ambition was positively related to higher affective organizational commitment beyond achievement striving, especially when more organizational career opportunities were perceived. However, controlling for perceived organizational career opportunities and achievement striving, ambition was also positively related to increased organizational turnover intentions. Overall, the studies suggest that ambition among employees is generally positive and indirectly beneficial for individual job performance evaluations, but also poses some risks to organizational retention management.

Ambition is a relatively stable personal disposition, defined as “the persistent and generalized striving for success, attainment, and accomplishment” (T.A. Judge & Kammeyer-Mueller, 2012, p. 759). It is often assumed that ambition is a highly relevant personality characteristic in many social contexts (T.A. Judge & Kammeyer-Mueller, 2012; Pettigrove, 2007) and that it should exert significant effects on a broad range of work and career behaviors and outcomes (e.g., Jones, Sherman, & Hogan, 2017; T.A. Judge & Kammeyer-Mueller, 2012), such as job performance (Huang et al., 2014).

However, although ambition might be a key variable for better understanding many work and organizational outcomes, there has been comparatively little and fragmented research focusing on ambition (Jones et al., 2017; T.A. Judge & Kammeyer-Mueller, 2012). Most existing studies on ambition have focused on occupational attainment (e.g., status, salary, promotions) and seldom on other important work-related outcomes, such as job performance or organizational commitment (T.W.H. Ng & Feldman, 2014a; Otto, Roe, Sobiraj, Baluku, & Garrido Vásquez, 2017). Moreover, research typically investigated ambition only indirectly as a component of another distinct but related construct, for example, as a form of goal setting, self-enhancement values, or facet of conscientiousness or extraversion (Huang et al., 2014; Jones et al., 2017). Such approaches tap into constructs closely related to ambition, but are

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insufficient if one wants to investigate the nature, predictors, and consequences of the core construct of ambition more specifically (T. A. Judge & Kammeyer-Mueller, 2012). Moreover, the specific processes why ambition should lead to higher performance evaluations remained largely unaddressed. This is also the case for other organizationally relevant outcomes, such as work-related commitment or turnover intentions, where existing research is sparse (Desrochers & Dahir, 2000) despite the potentially important effects of employee ambition on their commitment to and desire to remain in a current organization. Finally, existing research has not sufficiently addressed the question of incremental validity and to what extent ambition can predict workplace outcomes beyond other related general dispositions.

To address these issues, we conducted two studies among diverse groups of employees (including supervisors and spouse/life partners) with an improved measure of ambition as a general disposition to explore its relation to workplace outcomes. Study 1 examined employee-supervisor-spouse/life partners triads to explore how and why ambition relates to job performance ratings by supervisors. Based on socioanalytic personality theory (Hogan & Holland, 2003), this study suggests that ambition exerts important reputation effects and thereby links self-rated ambition to ambition ratings by the supervisor and spouse/life partner. In addition, we show that supervisor-rated ambition of an employee is linked with supervisor-rated task performance and promotability of that employee, beyond employee proactivity and generalized self-efficacy. Study 2 draws on the theory of purposeful work behavior (M.R. Barrick, Mount, & Li, 2013) to examine the organizational commitment outcomes of ambition. We show with a three-month time-lagged study that ambition relates to affective organizational commitment and organizational turnover intentions beyond achievement striving and that the relation with commitment is moderated by perceived organizational career opportunities.

Combined, these studies make several contributions towards a better theoretical, empirical, and practical understanding about the nature and work outcomes of ambition. First, we provide new insight into the functioning of ambition by highlighting its reputational role for performance evaluations. We thereby contribute to a better understanding of why ambition as a general personal characteristic is linked with performance ratings. Second, we provide novel insights into the relations of ambition with affective organizational commitment and turnover intentions, including investigating important boundary conditions. We thus contribute to an enhanced understanding of when ambition relates to organizational commitment outcomes, including the potential downsides of having ambitious employees.

1. Study 1: the reputation effects of ambition on job performance and promotability evaluations

Ambition as a general personal disposition should be meaningfully related to performance outcomes because general dispositions lead to the development and pursuit of specific goals that are in accordance with the respective disposition (M.R. Barrick et al., 2013; M.R. Barrick, Stewart, & Piotrowski, 2002). Because ambition is “the persistent and generalized striving for success, attainment, and accomplishment” (T.A. Judge & Kammeyer-Mueller, 2012, p. 759), we can specifically expect that ambition as a general disposition inclines people to pursue goals related to accomplishment (e.g., receiving recognition) and status striving (e.g., influence, high-level positions). These goals will require working hard, fulfilling job requirements, and showing high job performance because these are important means for attaining accomplishment and status goals (e.g., recognition and promotions). Ambition as a general disposition can thus lead to motivational states (e.g., investment of energy and having higher levels of work-related commitment and ambitious goals) that drive work-related behaviors and job performance (M.R. Barrick et al., 2002).

There is some indirect evidence that ambition has important performance effects. Meta-analytic results showed that ambition (assessed indirectly as an aspect of extraversion) is significantly related to adaptive performance at work (i.e., the proficiency with which employees alter their behavior in response to the demands of a new task, event, situation, or environmental constraints; Huang et al., 2014). Moreover, another meta-analysis showed that the personality traits of extraversion and conscientiousness, which relate to ambition in facets such as assertiveness, activity, achievement striving, or self-discipline (Jones et al., 2017), are positively related to job performance (M.R. Barrick & Mount, 1991). We can thus expect that ambition is positively associated with performance-related outcomes due to the various performance-related behaviors that ambitious people undertake in the pursuit of their ambitious accomplishment and status goals. In other words, achieving high job performance can be seen as one means of attaining ambitious goals.

In our study, we specifically focus on two types of performance evaluations by supervisors: *task performance* which is directly related to the organization’s technical core or functioning, for example, by executing the technical processes or by fulfilling other, often contract-based, task requirements (Motowidlo, Borman, & Schmit, 1997); and *promotability* which is an evaluation of “the favorability of an employee’s advancement prospects” (Greenhaus, Parasuraman, & Wormley, 1990, p. 69) and reflects an employee’s projected performance at higher managerial levels (London & Stumpf, 1983).

1.1. Reputation effects of ambition

While researchers have acknowledged that ambition should lead to higher job performance, the mechanisms of why effects on performance evaluations should occur have remained underexplored. To advance the theoretical understanding of why ambition can affect job performance evaluations, we draw on socioanalytic personality theory (Hogan & Holland, 2003). According to this perspective, people transmit signals about underlying qualities, such as ambition, to receivers who use these signals to form an impression about qualities (e.g., general dispositions) of the signal sender that are not directly observable (Connelly, Certo, Ireland, & Reutzel, 2011; Spence, 1973). Assessments about personality dispositions of other people are thus based on their behaviors in public and form the reputation of that person. For example, a supervisor might think that a specific employee is ambitious because he perceives specific ambitious behaviors (e.g., voluntarily taking on leadership roles) of this employee in different contexts.

Ambition could lead to a reputation as being ambitious because it can be signaled to other people through a variety of behaviors; for example, expressing or accepting highly challenging goals or showing high commitment and persistence in the pursuit of desirable goals. People who are in a position to frequently observe such signals should thus form a judgement about the degree of a person's ambition. Because we conceptualize ambition as a general disposition, ambition should be manifested in different life roles as well as various contexts/situations within those different life roles. Hence, ambitious people should send respective signals consistently across situations both in the workplace and at home. Consequently, people who frequently interact with this focal person (e.g., supervisors, spouse/life partners) should be able to form judgments about the focal person's level of ambition that are significantly related to the focal person's own self-assessment of ambition.

Hypothesis 1. Self-rated ambition of employees is positively related to (a) supervisor-rated and (b) spouse/life partner-rated ambition of the focal employee.

Extending this line of reasoning, we propose that in situations where performance is evaluated by others (typically supervisors), the reputation effects of ambition are critical. According to socioanalytic personality theory (Hogan & Holland, 2003), reputation is the key linking mechanism between self-assessed dispositions (i.e., a person's identity) and job performance ratings. This can be explained through various cognitive processes (Feldman, 1981): Employees build a reputation with their supervisors based on external cues (e.g., appearances) and observed behaviors, which then influence the salience of information and the information that supervisors attend to and recall in relation to that subordinate. Thus, managers who perceive their subordinate to be ambitious should be more likely to pay attention to and recall information that confirms this assumption. For example, a supervisor who perceives a subordinate as ambitious might pay more attention to, and better recall, situations where this employee was willing to accept a challenging work goal, or situations where this employee invested considerable time and energy to attain a highly desirable goal at work. Moreover, due to its potential positive effects on performance-related outcomes, ambition should be a disposition that is evaluated positively by supervisors among their subordinates. Supervisors who perceive a subordinate to be ambitious might thus generally pay more attention to positive information about this employee's behavior and performance compared to negative more neutral information. This selective attention and recall of positive performance-related information would then positively affect the performance rating by the supervisor (Shore, Barksdale, & Shore, 1995).

In addition, supervisors can be expected to base their judgments about employees' future achievements on those current behaviors that signal their capacities and talents. As such, positively inclined performance-related information processing for an employee who is perceived to be ambitious should also affect the supervisor's rating of promotability. Moreover, supervisors might evaluate ambition—a positively connoted employee characteristic in the workplace—as an indicator for future performance, positively affecting their promotability assessment.

Hypothesis 2. There is an indirect positive relation between employee self-rated ambition and supervisor-rated (a) task performance and (b) promotability through higher levels of supervisor-rated ambition of the focal employee.

1.2. Examining incremental predictive validity beyond proactivity and generalized self-efficacy

To establish incremental predictive utility of ambition beyond related personal dispositions, we investigated **Hypothesis 2** while controlling for self-rated proactivity and generalized self-efficacy of the employee. Because ambition shares some conceptual overlap with these dispositions and both are related to higher job performance (T.A. Judge & Bono, 2001; Thomas, Whitman, & Viswesvaran, 2010), clarifying the incremental validity of ambition is important to provide further evidence for the unique relation of ambition with performance evaluations.

1.2.1. Proactivity

Proactivity is a behavioral tendency to be relatively unconstrained by situational forces, and to affect environmental change (Bateman & Crant, 1993). People high in proactivity are inclined to identify and act upon opportunities, take action and show initiative, and persist until they have achieved the desired environmental change (Crant, 2000). This disposition thus shows some meaningful relations with ambition. Notably, ambition is not just wishful thinking about desired states or objects, but predisposes people to take action to make such wishes a reality. Ambitious people thus not only desire ambitious objects or states, but actively pursue their attainment (Pettigrove, 2007). Similar to proactivity, ambition should thus lead to proactive behaviors that are future-focused, change-oriented, and self-starting. However, ambition also has some notable differences to proactivity. Proactivity refers to a broader, more general tendency to engage in change-oriented behaviors for any type of desired future object or state (e.g., a better relationship with one's supervisor, better customer service, better work-life balance). By contrast, ambition pertains to desiring and pursuing highly scarce and not easily to obtain states or objects. Thus, although ambitious people can be expected to have a proactive tendency in relation to their ambitious goals, ambition cannot be equated with having a proactive inclination in general. Because ambition is more specifically pertaining to actions to attain highly desirable and scarce states and objects, we can moreover presume that ambition can predict performance evaluation outcomes beyond proactivity.

1.2.2. Generalized self-efficacy

Being more ambitious should also be meaningfully related to higher levels of confidence to master challenges. Based on goal setting theory research (Locke & Latham, 2002), we assume that people with high confidence in their ability to attain challenging goals should also be more likely to set and pursue challenging and competitive goals—which is a typical expression of ambition. In our study, we

specifically focus on generalized self-efficacy, a general belief in one's overall competence to show the required performance across a wide variety of achievement situations (Chen, Gully, & Eden, 2001). We assume people with more generalized self-efficacy should be more likely to strive for ambitious goals due to having increased confidence in being able to successfully master challenges, and thus realize their ambitions. This reasoning is supported by research showing that ambition (measured as a combination of being competitive, leader-like, confident, and upwardly mobile) is positively related to being self-assured (Jones et al., 2017). However, ambition is not the same as confidence or generalized self-efficacy: Being ambitious pertains to striving for valued and scarce objects and states, whereas self-efficacy is a belief in one's personal ability to master challenges. Because ambition is thus more goal- and action-oriented towards aims that reflect success, attainment, and accomplishment, we can also presume that ambition can predict job performance evaluations beyond generalized self-efficacy.

1.3. Consideration of socio-demographic, human capital, and work environmental factors

In addition to testing the incremental relation of ambition with workplace outcomes beyond related personal dispositions, we also tested if ambition is related to outcomes independent of a set of socio-demographic, human capital, and work environmental factors. First, we considered gender as a control. Existing research did not broadly address the question whether there might be systematic gender differences in ambition. Exceptions include the study by Ashby and Schoon (2010) which showed that ambition (assessed as the desire to get promoted and having a challenging job) predicted future earnings and social status for teenage boys as well as girls. Qualitative studies support the notion that women see themselves as ambitious, affected by workplace experiences (Harman & Sealy, 2017). However, Sools, Van Engen, and Baerveldt (2007) report a qualitative study among Dutch managers, which showed that women who are enacting their ambition face a paradoxical situation where expressing ambition is both organizationally desired and contradicting typical female gender role expectations. The masculinity inherent in the notion of ambition as a resource is also supported by the qualitative study by Benschop, van den Brink, Doorewaard, and Leenders (2013). Despite the relative scarcity of research on this topic, it is thus possible that ambition might be differently expressed by men and women which warrants investigating if the presumed workplace effects of ambition are depending on gender.

We have also considered age in years, education (no university degree vs. some university degree), and organizational tenure in years as potentially relevant variables. These factors can represent differences in available human capital (i.e., skills, knowledge), which might affect job performance and career attainment (T.W.H. Ng, Eby, Sorensen, & Feldman, 2005). Moreover, some typical desires of ambition in terms of status, compensation, prestige, or recognition (i.e., external motives) are negatively related to age (Kooij, De Lange, Jansen, Kanfer, & Dikkers, 2011), which might result in age and organizational tenure differences in ambition that could be linked with work outcomes. In addition, ambition can be related to increased educational attainment (T.A. Judge & Kammeyer-Mueller, 2012), which might in turn be related to better job performance. Finally, we considered contractual working hours and organization size as controls. These variables can represent work environment hurdles for career attainment (T.W.H. Ng, Feldman, 2014a; T.W.H. Ng & Feldman, 2014b) because they can affect the amount of work an employee is able to complete and the career developmental prospects available in the current organization. It is possible that ambitious employees differ in such contextual factors because they seek out different work arrangements and environments (e.g., jobs with more work hours or larger organizations with more development opportunities), which could also affect performance evaluation outcomes. In sum, controlling for this set of variables allows to rule out alternative explanations for the relations between ambition and work outcomes.

1.4. Method

1.4.1. Sample and procedure

The sample was recruited by student assistants working at a German-speaking university in Switzerland. The student assistants contacted potential participants for an online survey via email through their personal networks. No monetary incentives were provided for participation in the study. Meta-analytic evidence (Wheeler, Shanine, Leon, & Whitman, 2014) shows that student-recruited samples are as diverse as samples recruited via other means and that this sampling strategy does not have a meaningful impact on results compared to using other sampling methods. A priori defined pre-conditions to participate in this study as main/focal participant were: (a) older than 18 years, (b) employed for at least 40% of a full-time position, (c) having a supervisor, and (d) having a spouse or living in a permanent partnership. The link to the online survey (including the central self-rated study measures such as self-rated ambition, proactivity, and generalized self-efficacy) was sent out to 206 main participants who agreed to participate in the study. The response rate was 76%, $N = 157$. We excluded eleven (7%) participants because they did not have a supervisor/spouse/life partner or did not provide the necessary codes for matching data between main participants and supervisor/spouse/life partner. Data from the spouse/life partners and supervisors were collected via a separate online questionnaire (invitation via email and including measures of other-rated ambition, supervisor-rated promotability, and supervisor-rated job performance). The data from the different sources were matched with a generated code that was a clear identifier for belonging to specific dyads and triads. All participants gave their permission to match the data. From the 146 remaining main participants, 108 (74%) main participant-supervisor dyads, and 123 (84%) main participant-spouse/life partner dyads were available. From 100 participants (68%), full triads were available. For reasons of parsimony, we will describe the sample with the full triads here. Participants with full triad data did not significantly differ in self-rated ambition or sociodemographic variables compared to participants with either only self-rated ambition data or only supervisor- or spouse/life-partner-rated ambition data.

Within the full triad sample, main participants had a mean age of 41.53 years ($SD = 12.78$), mean overall work tenure of 20.32 years ($SD = 12.82$), mean organizational tenure of 9.13 years ($SD = 9.07$, Median = 6.00 years), and 63% of the participants were

Table 1
Cronbach's alphas, means, standard deviations, and Pearson's correlations between the study variables, study 1.

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13
1 Gender ¹	–	–	–												
2 Age	42.00	12.71	0.05	–											
3 Organizational tenure (in years)	9.48	9.56	0.05	0.56***	–										
4 Education ²	–	–	0.17*	–0.14	–0.15	–									
5 Organization size ³	4.60	2.43	0.03	0.02	0.16	0.01	–								
6 Contractual working hours	34.38	8.84	0.38***	–0.02	0.08	–0.02	0.22*	–							
7 Ambition (self-rated)	3.49	0.76	0.09	–0.10	–0.03	0.21*	0.19*	0.11	<i>0.90</i>						
8 Ambition (supervisor-rated)	3.80	0.61	0.05	–0.14	–0.03	0.22*	0.18	0.15	0.33**	<i>0.84</i>					
9 Ambition (life partner-rated)	3.59	0.71	0.14	0.01	0.01	0.28**	0.07	0.06	0.45***	0.20*	<i>0.88</i>				
10 Proactivity	3.85	0.48	0.07	0.20*	0.21**	–0.01	0.21**	–0.01	0.41***	0.24*	0.12	<i>0.74</i>			
11 Generalized self-efficacy	4.08	0.51	0.06	0.26**	0.15	–0.02	0.27**	0.08	0.28**	0.14	–0.01	0.50***	<i>0.84</i>		
12 Promotability supervisor-rated	5.13	1.23	–0.02	–0.25*	–0.15	0.25**	0.14	0.06	0.13	0.58***	0.16	0.06	0.06	<i>0.74</i>	
13 Performance supervisor-rated	4.67	0.52	–0.11	0.06	0.11	0.03	–0.10	–0.06	–0.16	0.44***	0.00	–0.09	–0.06	0.39***	<i>0.85</i>

Note. $N = 146$ (for correlations including only main participant ratings), $N = 123$ (for correlations including main participant and life partner-ratings), $N = 108$ (for correlations including main participant and supervisor-ratings), $N = 101$ (for correlations including life partner and supervisor ratings); Cronbach's alphas are in diagonal in italics; ¹ 0 = female, 1 = male; ² 0 = no university degree, 1 = some university degree; ³ 1 = 1–11; 2 = 11–50; 3 = 51–200; 4 = 201–500; 5 = 501–1000; 6 = 1001–5000; 7 = 5001–10,000; 8 = 10,001 or more employees.

* $p < .05$.

** $p < .01$.

*** $p < .001$.

female. About half (49%) of the participants had a higher education occupational degree (Bachelor or Master level), the other half of the sample had other types of occupational education (e.g., an apprenticeship). The participants were employed within several different fields, for instance, medicine and health, business and finance, education, computer and technology, or sales and merchandising.

1.4.2. Missing data treatment

In the analyses, we use the maximum available information from the triads and applied pairwise deletion for the calculation of the correlation matrix where different triad patterns were relevant. There were no missing data on single items or scales. Within the path model, where only main participants and supervisor were included, we used a full information maximum likelihood (FIML) estimator. We applied a FIML because it requires the less restrictive missing assumption of missing at random (MAR) instead of missing completely at random (MCAR) (Graham & Coffman, 2012). Moreover, FIML is generally considered as the best available option to model missing data because of highly trustworthy parameter estimates (Graham & Coffman, 2012; Little & Rubin, 2014).

1.4.3. Measures

All scales were administered in German and where necessary, items were translated in a blind parallel translation process (Van de Vijver & Leung, 1997). *Ambition* was assessed with a newly developed and evaluated 5-item measure in German (i.e., “I am ambitious”; “I strive for success”; “I have challenging goals; “For me it is very important to achieve outstanding results in my life”; “For me it is very important to accomplish great things”) with a 5-point Likert-type response scale (1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*). The scale development and evaluation study (Hirschi & Spurk, 2021) showed high Cronbach’s alphas between 0.84 and 0.90 in different samples, high retest reliability ($r = 0.68$) across six months, construct distinctness (e.g., via CFA model comparisons and Fornell-Larcker tests) from several existing ambition scales and related personal dispositions as well as incremental validity for predicting career satisfaction beyond several other ambition scales. Providing support for criterion validity, the evaluation study also showed a significant predictive utility for objective and subjective career success beyond other personal dispositions.

To assess *supervisor- and spouse/life partner-rated ambition*, we reformulated all five ambition items to be applicable as *other* ratings (e.g., “She/he is ambitious” or “She/he strives for success”). The same 5-point Likert-type scale as in the self-ratings was applied.

Task performance was assessed as supervisor-rated task performance on the 5-point Likert-type scale from Williams and Anderson (1991). As scale validity evidence, the authors of the scale showed significant relations of this measure to other performance measures (e.g., organizational citizenship behaviors) and job cognitions. Due to length considerations in the supervisor survey, we selected the three highest loading items from the original 5-item scale (e.g., “Meets formal requirements of her/his job”).

Promotability was rated by supervisors with three items (e.g., “If I had to select a successor for my position, it would be this subordinate”) on a 7-point Likert-type scale from Thacker and Wayne (1995). The scale authors showed that this measure is significantly related to different employee influence tactics (e.g., assertiveness) but not to job level.

Proactivity was measured with seven items (e.g., “I actively attack problems”) on a 5-point Likert-type German-language scale developed by Frese, Fay, Hilburger, Leng, and Tag (1997). This scale assesses the personality disposition of personal initiative and is conceptually and empirically equivalent to proactive personality (Fay & Frese, 2001; Tornau & Frese, 2013). Fay and Frese (2001) show validity evidence for this measure in terms of significant relations to environmental supports, personality variables, or behavior and performance.

Generalized self-efficacy was measured with a 3-item (e.g., “In difficult situations I can trust on my skills”) 5-point Likert-type scale from Beierlein, Kovaleva, Kemper, and Rammstedt (2012). The scale showed high levels of construct validity in other studies, and showed high correlations with other well-accepted self-efficacy measures (Schwarzer & Jerusalem, 2010).

Additionally, we assessed the control variables: *gender* (0 = female; 1 = male), *age* in years, *organizational tenure* in years, *education* (0 = no university degree, 1 = some university degree), *organization size* (1 = 1–11 employees; 2 = 11–50; 3 = 51–200; 4 = 201–500; 5

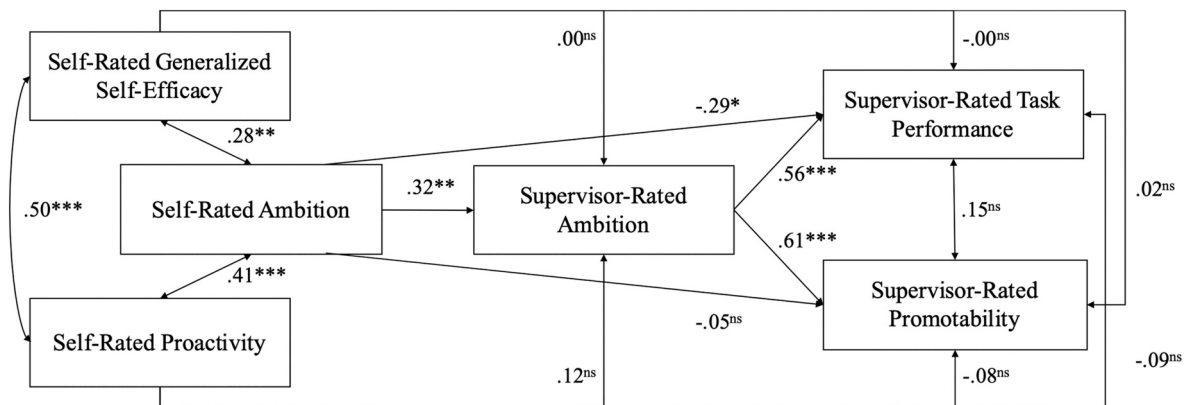


Fig. 1. Path modeling results of the relations between self-rated ambition and supervisor-rated task performance and promotability (Study 1). Note. $N = 146$. ns: nonsignificant; * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

= 501–1000; 6 = 1001–5000; 7 = 5001–10,000; 8 = 10,001 or more employees), and *contractual working hours* per week.

1.5. Results and discussion

1.5.1. Reputation effects

The Cronbach's alphas, means, standard deviations, and correlations between the study variables (and controls) can be seen in [Table 1](#). Self-rated ambition was positively correlated with supervisor- ($r = 0.33, p < .01$) and life partner-rated ($r = 0.45, p < .001$) ambition, supporting Hypotheses 1a and 1b. However, self-rated ambition was not significantly correlated with supervisor-rated task performance ($r = -0.16, ns$) or supervisor-rated promotability ($r = 0.13, ns$). Yet, supervisor-rated ambition was positively related to supervisor-rated task performance ($r = 0.44, p < .001$) and supervisor-rated promotability ($r = 0.58, p < .001$).

To test [Hypothesis 2](#), we built a path model with all self-rated personality constructs and all controls as exogenous variables, supervisor-rated ambition as endogenous indirect effect variable, and supervisor-rated task performance and promotability as endogenous outcome variables ([Fig. 1](#)). Exogenous variables were allowed to correlate and the self-rated personality and controls were allowed to predict the outcome variables. Moreover, supervisor-rated ambition was regressed on self-rated ambition, self-rated proactivity, and self-rated generalized self-efficacy. The outcomes (i.e., task performance and promotability evaluations) were allowed to correlate. Finally, we tested the model with and without controls (i.e., gender, age, organizational tenure in years, education, organization size, and contractual working hours). Ambition was positively related to higher education levels and larger organization size but not to any of the other variables. Moreover, results did not differ when including controls. We thus report results without these controls to increase power and interpretability. However, to establish incremental validity, we report results while controlling for self-reported proactivity and generalized self-efficacy. Finally, we conducted an indirect effect analyses with 5000 bootstrap draws using Mplus version 7.1 ([Muthén & Muthén, 1998–2015](#)).

The path coefficients of the calculated model can be seen in [Fig. 1](#) (the calculated model was a saturated model, the fit indices were: $\chi^2 = 0, df = 0, CFI = 1.00, RMSEA = 0.00, SRMR = 0.00$). Within this model, as expected, the results showed a positive indirect effect from self-rated ambition to supervisor-rated task performance ($\beta = 0.18, 95\% CI = 0.06–0.30, p < .01$) and promotability ($\beta = 0.20, 95\% CI = 0.06–0.33, p < .01$) via supervisor-rated ambition, supporting Hypotheses 2a and 2b. It seems notable that, contrary to what might be expected, self-rated ambition showed a negative relation to supervisor-rated task performance when supervisor-rated ambition was controlled for in the path model. This could be because employees might direct their general ambition also towards activities, which are not task-related, such as advancing their own careers by engaging in networking outside of their organization or by learning new skills for potential future career possibilities. Hence, it could be that expressions of employee ambition, which are outside of the view of supervisors, might actually be harmful for task performance. Future research would be needed to explore this in more detail.

Overall, the results support assumptions from socioanalytic personality theory ([Hogan & Holland, 2003](#)) that reputation is a key linking mechanism between self-rated personality and performance evaluations: more ambitious individuals were perceived as more ambitious by their supervisors, and that this reputation was linked to higher performance and promotability evaluations.

2. Study 2: ambition and organizational commitment: the moderating role of perceived organizational career opportunities

In this study, we wanted to extend our previous investigation on individual performance outcomes of ambition by focusing on organizational commitment outcomes. Moreover, we wanted to further explore under which conditions ambition might be more positively or negatively related to organizational commitment. Specifically, we focused on two outcomes that are pivotal for employee retention—*affective organizational commitment* and *organizational turnover intentions*. *Affective organizational commitment* denotes an emotional attachment to, identification with, and involvement in the organization ([Meyer, Stanley, Herscovitch, & Topolnitsky, 2002](#)). *Turnover intentions* are conceived to be a conscious and deliberate willfulness to leave the organization, and are thereby one important predictor for actual turnover ([Tett & Meyer, 1993](#)). To examine boundary conditions under which ambition might have stronger or weaker relations with organizational commitment, we investigated if the relations of ambition to these outcomes depend on the amount of perceived organizational career opportunities in the organization. [Desrochers and Dahir \(2000\)](#) showed that ambition (assessed as importance of career advancement) was positively related with turnover intentions when controlling for job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and professional commitment. However, we know very little about how ambition as a general disposition relates to organizational attitudes and under what conditions such relations occur.

We expect that ambition is generally positively related to a range of organizational commitment outcomes, including *affective organizational commitment* and a stronger cognitive attachment to one's organization that is expressed by lower turnover intentions. Based on the theory of purposeful work behavior ([M.R. Barrick et al., 2013](#)), general dispositions predispose individuals to attach more or less importance to various higher-order goals (e.g., accomplishment/achievement striving, status striving), which leads to different work-related behaviors (e.g., task performance), moderated by task and social characteristics. It is hence likely that ambition—as a more general disposition—predisposes people to pursue specific types of goals (i.e., accomplishment and status goals). Ambition as a general disposition should thus lead people to show higher commitment in the pursuit of ambitious goals. This is likely to correspond with different indicators of higher work-related commitment because the specific requirements and opportunities in the work role often allow striving for challenging and scarce outcomes, such as a high salary, promotions, excellent job performance, status, or recognition, which should be especially attractive goals for ambitious people ([M.R. Barrick et al., 2013](#)). In other words, ambitious people might show increased commitment to the organization because the organizational context facilitates attaining goals that they

have set according to their ambitious tendencies.

However, we propose that the positive relations of ambition and organizational commitment are particularly likely to emerge when many career opportunities are perceived within the current organization. Based on the theory of purposeful work behavior (M.R. Barrick et al., 2013), we can assume that employees are more motivated to work in an organization if they perceive the characteristics of the work environment helping them to realize their goals. If the organization is perceived to provide many career opportunities, ambitious employees should thus be more likely to feel that the current organizational context is supportive of their desire to achieve their ambitious goals. This should strengthen the relation between ambition and increased affective organizational commitment and reduced turnover intentions. In other words, under conditions of high perceived organizational career opportunities, ambitious employees have specifically high affective organizational commitment and low turnover intentions because they perceive their organization as conducive to achieve their ambitious goals. Conversely, if few career opportunities are perceived, employees with high ambition might judge this to be detrimental to their achieving their goals, and thus become emotionally detached from their organization. This would also imply that they are more likely to leave the organization to pursue their ambition in a more supportive organizational environment.

Hypothesis 3. Ambition is (a) positively related to affective organizational commitment and (b) negatively related to organizational turnover intentions, moderated by perceived organizational career opportunities, such that the relations are stronger when perceived organizational career opportunities are higher.

2.1. Examining Incremental Predictive Validity beyond Achievement Striving

To establish incremental predictive utility of ambition beyond related personal dispositions, we investigated [Hypothesis 3](#) while controlling for achievement striving. Conceptually, ambition is closely related to achievement striving. However, even though it is reasonable to assume that highly ambitious people also show high achievement striving, these constructs are conceptually distinct. Achievement focuses more on the quality of performance and on how well a task is done. Individuals with high achievement striving thus aim at feeling competent and effective in their tasks. By contrast, ambition represents the striving for valued objects and thus potential outcomes of task performance (T.A. Judge & Kammeyer-Mueller, 2012). A person high in achievement striving thus primarily values doing a task well, whereas a person high in ambition primarily values the desired objects (e.g., status, wealth) that might or might not result from high performance. A person can thus strive for these valued objects without necessarily aiming at showing competence and high-quality performance in the tasks that might lead to the outcomes (T.A. Judge & Kammeyer-Mueller, 2012). Due to the conceptual distinction between ambition and achievement striving and because ambition more specifically represents the desire to attain certain objects and states, which might be attained through the organization (e.g., status, financial rewards), we expect that ambition can predict workplace outcomes beyond achievement striving. We specifically test this assumption in relation to affective organizational commitment and turnover intentions. Testing the incremental validity of ambition over achievement striving in relation to these two outcomes is meaningful because achievement striving is a facet of conscientiousness (Costa & McCrae, 1992), which is in turn related to more job involvement and organizational commitment (Choi, Oh, & Colbert, 2015).

2.2. Method

2.2.1. Sample and procedure

Three student assistants contacted 695 people from their personal networks in German-speaking Switzerland. No monetary incentives were provided for participation in the study. Fifty-three percent responded to the email by going to the website of the online questionnaire. Among these, 70% completed the questionnaire. Twelve people were excluded because they did not correspond to the criteria of working a minimum of 40% of a full-time equivalent. This resulted in a sample of 248 participants at T1, with a response rate of 36%. Participants who participated at T1 were invited to complete another questionnaire three months later, with a 78% response rate and $N = 194$ as final sample to be used in all of the subsequent analyses (i.e., listwise deletion). There were no missing data on single items or scales within each measurement point. We chose to separate the predictor and outcome variables over time to reduce common method bias in the subsequent results (MacKenzie & Podsakoff, 2012).¹ The mean age in the sample was 38.37 years ($SD = 12.27$), 99 (51%) were male, mean working hours were 39.65 per week ($SD = 12.91$), and mean organizational tenure was 90.33 months ($SD = 108.73$, Median = 49.00 months). The sample was heterogeneous with regard to educational level (58.6% had a university degree; BSc, MSc, or PhD) and occupations (e.g., working as technicians, sales representatives, insurance specialists, craftsperson, or office workers with leadership functions). Ambition, achievement striving, and perceived organizational career opportunities were assessed at T1, and affective organizational commitment and turnover intentions were assessed at T2. Participants who dropped out between T1 and T2 did not differ from participants who participated at both time points regarding their values in ambition, achievement striving, and perceived organizational career opportunities at T1, all p -values above 0.05.

¹ As pointed out by an anonymous reviewer, a potential caveat of this procedure is that perceived career opportunities, assessed at T1, might have changed until the assessment of the outcome variables at T2, three months later. This might affect the observed moderation effect of perceived career opportunities in the relation between ambition and the outcomes.

Table 2
Cronbach's alphas and means, standard deviations, and Pearson's correlations between the study variables, study 2.

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
1 Gender ¹	–	–	–										
2 Age	38.38	12.27	0.21**	–									
3 Organizational tenure (in months)	90.33	108.73	0.22**	0.65***	–								
4 Education ²	–	–	–0.03	0.28***	0.14	–							
5 Organization size ³	4.42	2.52	0.08	0.01	0.07	0.26***	–						
6 Contractual working hours	36.74	9.78	0.13	–0.08	–0.02	–0.09	0.06	–					
7 Achievement striving T1	3.91	0.49	0.04	0.11	0.09	–0.07	–0.03	0.04	<i>0.76</i>				
8 Ambition T1	3.36	0.67	0.14	–0.19**	–0.09	0.05	0.03	–0.05	0.46***	<i>0.81</i>			
9 Perceived organizational career opportunities T1	4.42	1.62	0.10	–0.16*	–0.06	–0.16*	0.27***	0.02	0.15*	0.30***	<i>0.85</i>		
10 Affective organizational commitment T2	3.31	0.65	0.22**	0.24***	0.27***	–0.14	–0.12	0.00	0.29***	0.16*	0.25***	<i>0.75</i>	
11 Turnover intentions T2	2.10	1.16	–0.06	–0.33***	–0.23**	–0.04	0.01	–0.08	–0.08	0.13	–0.13	–0.41***	<i>0.87</i>

Note. $N = 194$; Cronbach's alphas are in diagonal in italics; ¹ 0 = female, 1 = male; ² 0 = no university degree, 1 = some university degree; ³ 1 = 1–9; 2 = 10–49; 3 = 50–249; 4 = 250–499; 5 = 500–999; 6 = 1000–6499; 7 = 6500–11,999; 8 = 12,000–29,999; 9 = 30,000 or more employees.

* $p < .05$.

** $p < .01$.

*** $p < .001$.

2.2.2. Measures

Ambition was measured with the same scale used in Study 1. Perceived organizational career opportunities were measured with the 3-item scale (e.g., “There are job opportunities available within my company that are of interest to me”) developed by Kraimer, Seibert, Wayne, Liden, and Bravo (2011) on a 7-point Likert-type response scale. The scale authors support the validity of the measure by showing significant relations to participation in job rotations and high-potential programs, receiving career mentoring, or higher leader-member exchange. Affective organizational commitment was measured with the German version (Schmidt, Hollmann, & Sodenkamp, 1998) of the 8-item (e.g., “This organization has a large personal meaning for me”) scale by N.J. Allen and Meyer (1990) on a 5-point Likert-type response scale. The scale has been widely used in research and showed, among others, significant relations to job satisfaction or job involvement (N.J. Allen & Meyer, 1996). Turnover intentions were measured with the 3-item scale (e.g., “I plan on leaving my job within the next year”) by Leiter, Laschinger, Day, and Oore (2011) on a 5-point Likert-type response scale. The scale authors showed significant relations of this measure to job satisfaction, coworker and supervisor incivility, or exhaustion, among others. All scales were administered in German and where necessary items were translated in a blind parallel translation process.

We assessed achievement striving with the respective subdimension of conscientiousness from the NEO-PI-R from the International Personality Item Pool’s (Goldberg et al., 2006) with the seven positively worded German items (e.g., “I plunge into tasks with all my heart”) using a 5-point Likert-type response scale (1 = strongly disagree and 5 = strongly agree).

Additionally, we assessed the same controls as in Study 1: gender (0 = female; 1 = male), age in years, organizational tenure in months, education (0 = no university degree; 1 = some university degree), and organization size (1 = 1–9; 2 = 10–49; 3 = 50–249; 4 = 250–499; 5 = 500–999; 6 = 1000–6499; 7 = 6500–11,999; 8 = 12,000–29,999; 9 = 30,000 or more employees).

2.3. Results and discussion

Table 2 shows the means, standard deviations, Cronbach’s alphas, and bivariate correlations of the assessed constructs. We conducted moderated hierarchical regression analyses to test Hypothesis 3 (Table 3). Within step one of this analysis, ambition, perceived organizational career opportunities, and achievement striving were entered as predictors into the regression model. In the second step, the interaction term between ambition and perceived organizational career opportunities was additionally entered. We conducted two separate regression models, one for affective organizational commitment as outcome, and the other for turnover intentions as outcome. Ambition was negatively related to age but not to any of the other control variables (i.e., gender, organizational tenure, education, organization size, and contractual working hours). Including controls did not change the significance of the results and we thus report results without controls to increase power and interpretability. However, to assess the incremental utility of ambition, we controlled for achievement striving.

Within the first step, ambition did not predict affective organizational commitment ($\beta = -0.03, ns$) but was unexpectedly positively related to turnover intentions ($\beta = 0.27, p < .001$), after considered conjointly with achievement striving and perceived organizational career opportunities. In this first step, 13% of affective organizational commitment and 8% of turnover intentions were explained by all predictors, both *p*-values below 0.05. In the second step, the interaction between ambition at T1 and perceived organizational career opportunities at T1 was significant when predicting affective organizational commitment at T2 ($\beta = 0.19, p < .001$), supporting Hypothesis 3a. This interaction effect explained an additional 3.6% of the variance in the outcome, $p < .05$. To examine the nature of the significant interaction, we conducted simple slope tests (see Fig. 2). The findings revealed that affective organizational commitment was highest for employees who were ambitious and perceived many organizational career opportunities. Moreover, the simple slope tests showed that ambition was positively related with affective organizational commitment under conditions of high perceived organizational career opportunities (for *SD* + 1: $\beta = 0.13, p < .05$) and not related with affective organizational commitment under conditions of low perceived organizational career opportunities (for *SD* -1: $\beta = -0.10, ns$). For turnover intentions at T2, we did not

Table 3

Results of moderation regression analysis of ambition with perceived organizational career opportunities when predicting organization-relevant outcomes, study 2.

Predictor	Affective organizational commitment T2				Turnover intentions T2			
	B	SE B	β	p	B	SE B	β	p
Step 1								
Achievement striving T1	0.18	0.05	0.27	0.00	-0.20	0.09	-0.17	0.02
Ambition T1	-0.02	0.05	-0.03	0.34	0.32	0.10	0.27	0.00
PCO T1	0.14	0.05	0.22	0.00	-0.22	0.09	-0.19	0.01
ΔR^2	0.127				0.075			
F for R^2	F(3, 190) = 9.25				F(3, 190) = 5.14			
Step 2								
Achievement striving T1	0.18	0.05	0.27	0.00	-0.20	0.09	-0.17	0.02
Ambition T1	-0.03	0.05	-0.05	0.26	0.33	0.10	0.28	0.00
PCO T1	0.15	0.05	0.22	0.00	-0.22	0.08	-0.19	0.01
Ambition T1 x PCO T1	0.12	0.04	0.19	0.00	-0.11	0.08	-0.10	0.08
ΔR^2	0.036				0.010			
F for change in R^2	F(1, 189) = 8.20				F(1, 189) = 1.99			

Note. N = 194; PCO = perceived organizational career opportunities; *p* values are for 1-sided tests due to directed hypotheses.

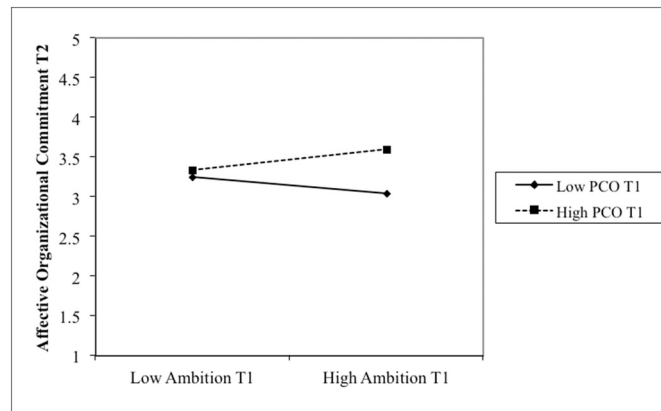


Fig. 2. Interaction plot for the relation between ambition and affective organizational commitment, moderated by perceived organizational career opportunities, Study 2.

PCO = Perceived organizational career opportunities, Low = minus 1 *SD*, High = plus 1 *SD*.

find an interaction effect between ambition at T1 and perceived organizational career opportunities at T1 ($\beta = -0.10$, *ns*). Therefore, Hypothesis 3b was not supported.

In sum, the results suggest that ambitious individuals only commit themselves to their organization if they perceive interesting career opportunities with their employer. Moreover, when holding achievement striving and career opportunities constant, ambitious individuals seem more inclined to voluntarily leave their job—irrespective of existing career opportunities. Possibly, ambitious employees are constantly on the lookout for other jobs that might allow them to achieve their ambitious goals even faster if they leave the current job for a better opportunity.

3. General discussion

The presumed effects of ambition on various work and career outcomes received broad popular attention, but scientific research on the issue has been sparse and inconclusive as well as hampered by inconsistent conceptualizations and measurements of ambition. In our studies, we specifically provided additional clarification on two main issues. First, we clarified how and why ambition is related to performance evaluation outcomes. Previous research suggested that ambition is positively related to adaptive job performance (Huang et al., 2014). However, this research was based on ambition assessed only indirectly as an aspect of extraversion. Based on socio-analytic personality theory (Hogan & Holland, 2003), we theorized and empirically confirmed that ambition as a specific general trait rated by employees (i.e., their identity) positively relates to higher supervisor-rated performance outcomes because ambitious employees send signals to important others that build a reputation as being ambitious. Conversely, we found no significant direct relation of self-rated ambition with supervisor-rated task performance or promotability, which supports our theorizing that ambition affects performance ratings primarily due to its reputation building. Our study can thus help to explain meta-analytic findings showing low correlations between personality traits such as the big five (M.R. Barrick & Mount, 1991; Hurtz & Donovan, 2000) or proactivity (Fuller & Marler, 2009) with job performance, especially if performance is not self-rated. In accordance with socioanalytic personality theory (Hogan & Holland, 2003), our results suggest that the various behaviors that employees exhibit due to their dispositions do not necessarily lead to higher levels of task performance evaluations directly but affect performance ratings mostly indirectly, due to reputation building.

Second, we showed that individual differences in ambition might have important implications for organizations because ambitious employees seem to be more demanding regarding available organizational career opportunities to feel attached to their employer and are generally more likely to consider leaving the organization in pursuit of their ambitions. This finding reflects the result reported by Desrochers and Dahir (2000) who showed that ambition (assessed as importance of career advancement) was positively related with turnover intentions. This finding suggests that ambition assessed as a general trait and as a context-specific aspiration can produce similar results, possibly because context-specific aspirations are expressions of the more general trait. Future research could investigate how and when effects of the general trait differ from effects of more specific ambition-related aspirations. Our study goes beyond previous findings by assessing ambition as a general disposition and controlling for achievement striving and perceived organizational career opportunities. The finding that ambition is positively related to turnover intention under certain conditions (i.e., when holding achievement striving and career opportunities constant) has important implications for human resources management practice. It shows that merely selecting ambitious people is not enough. Efforts also need to be undertaken to provide these employees with adequate developmental opportunities to keep them attached to the organization.

In addition, we also shed some light on how ambition as a general trait is related to different sociodemographic and contextual factors. In both samples, ambition was not related to gender. This adds to the relatively sparse literature on this topic, where quantitative and qualitative studies found that ambition is an important construct for males and females (Ashby & Schoon, 2010; Harman & Sealy, 2017), but that gender can play a role on how ambition is expressed and evaluated by others (Benschop et al., 2013; Sools et al.,

2007). Our study implies that if ambition is assessed as a general trait, gender differences in ambition are not very pronounced. This suggests that males and females are equally ambitious but might express their general ambition in different ways and contexts. Future studies could further explore this issue. In both studies, we also found that ambition was not significantly related to organizational tenure or contractual working hours. This suggests that ambition does not have strong effects on such employment characteristics and that ambitious employees might work for a variety of years in an organization and be engaged across different numbers of work hours. Finally, some findings emerged in one but not the other sample: older age was negatively related while educational level and organization size positively related to ambition. Although these findings were inconsistent in our studies, they confirm the assumption that some typical desires of ambition (e.g., status, compensation, prestige, or recognition) are negatively related to age (Kooij et al., 2011); that ambition can lead to increased educational attainment (T.A. Judge & Kammeyer-Mueller, 2012); or that ambitious employees seek out larger organizations which might offer more career advancement opportunities.

3.1. Limitations and future research

Some limitations of our studies and opportunities for future research should be considered. In Study 2, we considered perceived organizational career opportunities as a contextual boundary condition for the relations of ambition and organizational commitment. However, other contextual characteristics might be important to consider in future studies. For example, a competitive climate and organizational culture could attenuate the reputation effects of ambition on performance ratings and organizational commitment because this social context might be especially fitting for ambitious employees. Moreover, it is possible that contextual factors shape the expression of ambition in the work context. From an organizational perspective, especially job characteristics and demands (e.g., competitive performance management systems) might play an important role in shaping ambition after entering working life, as research showed that job characteristics can shape basic personality dispositions over time (Sutin & Costa, 2010). For future research, it seems of high theoretical and practical relevance to identify factors and processes through which organizations might shape the ambition of their employees.

Expanding upon this point, another line of future research could be to more closely examine the potential dark sides of ambition (Pettigrove, 2007). We have started to address this point in relation to increased turnover intentions but other possibilities also seem worthwhile to examine. For example, it might be that ambitious people are prone to workaholism that, in turn, might be detrimental to their health and well-being (Clark et al., 2016). Moreover, it could be that ambitious people engage in many self-serving behaviors, which might have negative effects on other peoples' job performance or well-being, or on team performance. A related issue is that future research could examine if ambition is necessarily expressed in accomplishment and status goals over other types of goal (e.g., communal goals) and whether ambition is necessarily self-serving or can also create social value, for example, if a person enacts their ambition towards social aims (e.g., social justice).

Finally, we should note that all samples came from a Germanic culture, and future research should establish the generalizability of our results to other national and cultural contexts. For example, the Germanic culture is considered to be high in individualism and masculinity (Hofstede, 2001), which might imply that ambition is particularly valued and associated with positive performance outcomes in this context. Related to this point, our studies did not find gender differences in ambition nor did the reported relations of ambition with the investigated outcomes differ when controlling for gender. However, some qualitative studies (Benschop et al., 2013; Sools et al., 2007) suggest that certain perceptions of ambition might be related to typical male gender roles. Future studies could thus more closely examine under which conditions the general disposition of ambition might be expressed in gender-specific ways and whether this affects the effects of ambition in certain contexts.

3.2. Implications for practice

Our studies have several implications for organizations, employees, and career counseling practices. First, our results imply that employees who are perceived as more ambitious by their supervisors are rewarded with higher performance ratings. Ambition does thus seem to be valued in its own right by leaders and organizations might include an assessment of ambition in their selection procedures. Moreover, employees could be more deliberate about how they can communicate to their supervisors that they are ambitious, for example, by explicitly aiming to attain challenging goals. Second, while our study implies that ambition is generally positively related to desirable personal and organizational outcomes, it can also have drawbacks regarding retention management. Although the observed effects in our study were not large, the results suggest that ambitious employees might be more inclined to leave the organization in pursuit of their ambitions. Organizations thus could consider providing ambitious employees with attractive career opportunities in the organization, if they want to keep them emotionally attached. For example, ambitious employees might react especially favorably when they receive training and are supported in their career development, combined with clear and realistic career prospects.

3.3. Conclusion

In two studies we clarified how, why, and when ambition as a general disposition is related to different work and organizational outcomes. The studies showed that reputation building and the possibilities to attain ambitious goals within an organization through increased career opportunities might be important mechanisms through which ambition relates to workplace outcomes. We could moreover establish the incremental utility of ambition beyond other general dispositions in explaining work-related outcomes. The presented studies should thereby provide a useful foundation for future research and practice applications to better understand how

the disposition of ambition affects work outcomes.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Andreas Hirschi: Conceptualization, Methodology, Formal analysis, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. **Daniel Spurk:** Conceptualization, Methodology, Formal analysis, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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