



## The relationship between external job mobility and salary attainment across career stages

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### ABSTRACT

The current study examines the relationship between external job mobility and salary for employees in different career stages. Based on career stage and career timetable theories, we predict that external job mobility would generate the greatest salary benefits for early-career employees whereas external job mobility would generate fewer salary benefits for employees in mid- and late career stages. Data collected from multiple industries in Hong Kong and the United States consistently show that, as expected, highly mobile early-career employees earn significantly greater salaries than their less mobile peers do. The positive effects of external job mobility on salary were stronger for early-career workers than for mid- and late-career workers.

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Job mobility refers to patterns of intra- and inter-organizational transitions over the course of a person's work life (Hall, 1996; Sullivan, 1999). As job mobility has become a more salient feature of employees' career paths (Arthur & Rousseau, 1996), the study of job mobility has become more central to researchers' understanding of how individuals' careers unfold (Ng, Sorensen, Eby, & Feldman, 2007). Researchers have become particularly interested in the role of *external job mobility* (changing organizations) in shaping people's careers. Specifically, previous research suggests that individuals who have greater external job mobility are more likely to earn higher salaries than those with less external job mobility (Brett & Stroh, 1997; Dreher & Cox, 2000; Lam & Dreher, 2004).

However, there is less evidence on whether the mobility–salary relationship is equally strong across the course of employees' careers. Exploring that possibility has both theoretical and practical importance. Because job mobility has been a strategy more commonly pursued by early-career employees, how job mobility affects mid- and late-career workers' salary progression has received less attention. At the same time, the average age of individuals in the workforce has continued to increase. It is theoretically important and timely, then, for researchers to explore whether the conventional wisdom that external job mobility leads to higher salaries extends to the experiences of mid- and late-career employees as well. Practically speaking, an aging workforce places additional demands on managers to help mid- and late-career subordinates plan for job changes in their careers, too.

The purpose of the current study is to examine the sign and magnitude of the relationship between external job mobility and salary across different career stages. Our core premise is that external job mobility will generate greater salary benefits for workers in the early career stage than for workers in mid- and late-career stages. Career stage and career timetable theories (e.g., Lawrence, 1988; Super, 1980) will be used as the theoretical guide.

### Theoretical background

#### *External job mobility and salary earned*

Based on Ng et al.'s (2007) work, we define external job mobility as voluntary job changes which involve changing employers. In the current dynamic career landscape (Arthur & Rousseau, 1996; Feldman & Ng, 2007; Sullivan & Arthur, 2006), employees are

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more likely to seek out external job mobility since they no longer adhere to the traditional career model of long-term service to one employer (Cheramie, Sturman, & Walsh, 2007; Hall, 1996). Besides, external job mobility represents a career strategy that has often been found to increase salary (Murrell, Frieze, & Olson, 1996).

Human capital theory (Becker, 1964) clearly supports this prediction. This theory suggests that more diverse work experiences are generally rewarded highly in the labor market. By working in a variety of organizations, individuals gain a wider range of job-related knowledge and skills and diverse perspectives which prove valuable to potential employers. These enhancements in knowledge, skill, and ability help mobile workers bid up their wages higher in the external labor market.

Social capital theory (Burt, 1992; Granovetter, 1973) also predicts that external job mobility leads to greater salary. Social capital is the sum of the actual and potential resources embedded within, available through, and derived from the network of relationships developed by an individual (Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998). Individuals who have worked in multiple organizations are more likely to have established greater numbers of social links with others in their industry. This heightened visibility in the labor market, in turn, helps highly-networked employees obtain higher-status higher-pay jobs (Lai, Lin, & Leung, 1998; Seibert, Kraimer, & Liden, 2001).

A positive relationship between external job mobility and salary has received general support in previous empirical research (e.g., Amuedo-Dorantes & Serrano-Padial, 2007; Sturman, Walsh, & Cheramie, 2008; Topel & Ward, 1992). At the same time, though, several studies have provided only mixed support for such a positive relationship (e.g., Fuller, 2008; Grand & Tahlin, 2002; Murrell et al., 1996), suggesting that there are other factors which affect salary as well.

The most frequently investigated of these other factors are demographic characteristics like gender and race (e.g., Brett & Stroh, 1997; Dreher & Cox, 2000). The theoretical rationale underlying these studies has been that gender and race are observable “surface-level” characteristics (Harrison, Price, Gavin, & Florey, 1998) which may evoke negative stereotypes and lead to pay discrimination. Extending this line of reasoning, we argue that career stage (which, through its strong correlation with age, mirrors a “surface-level” characteristic) is also likely to affect the strength of the mobility–salary relationship.

#### *Moderating effects of career stage*

Super's (1957, 1980, 1990) life-span, life-space model suggests that individuals go through multiple stages of career development over the course of their lives: exploration and establishment (early career), maintenance (mid-career), and eventual disengagement (late career). *Early career* is the time period during which individuals enter the labor market and initially explore different career opportunities and work activities (Cohen, 1991; Super, 1957). *Mid-career* refers to the time period during which individuals achieve some level of stability and some measure of achievement in their careers (Super, 1957; Williams & Savickas, 1990). *Late career* is the time period during which individuals have passed the peak of their career achievements and are preparing for lower work involvement or the transition to retirement (Greller & Simpson, 1999; Super, 1957).

Guided by Super's (1957) work on career stages, then, we define early career individuals as having work experience of less than 10 years, mid-career individuals as having 10 to 20 years of work experience, and late career individuals as having more than 20 years of work experience. There is no clear consensus among researchers as to how career stages should be operationalized (Cohen, 1991; Morrow & McElroy, 1987). Nonetheless, in general, the number of years of work experience has been viewed as a reasonable and objective indicator of career stage for most employees (Kumar & Giri, 2009; Tesluk & Jacobs, 1998).

Career timetable theory, proposed by Lawrence (1988), suggests that there are social norms regarding where an individual should be in his/her career path at any given time. In other words, we hold general expectations about the level of career achievement which is appropriate for individuals to have attained at different points in their lives. These generalized expectations, in turn, gradually develop into norms about whether individuals are to be considered “on track” or “off track” in their careers (Shore, Cleveland, & Goldberg, 2003). While “fast trackers” are likely to be viewed more favorably by organizations, those who have fallen behind the typical career timetable often fare worse in terms of obtaining organizational rewards (Shore et al., 2003).

Consistent with career timetable theory, we propose that there are social norms regarding how much mobility is considered appropriate for individuals in different career stages. Specifically, early-career workers are expected to have more job changes than mid- and late-career workers. Because early-career individuals are still experimenting with different “futures” and trying to find the right fit for themselves (Cron & Slocum, 1986; Super, Savickas, & Super, 1996), greater external job mobility is more attractive to them. Moreover, to the extent that early-career employees have fewer children or elderly parents, external job mobility is also a more feasible career strategy for them.

By the time individuals enter mid-career, though, they have often reached some level of career achievement and have secured positions in which they have some competence and with which they can identify (Gibson, 2003; Super, 1980). Many mid-career employees have also developed at least moderate levels of identification with their companies and occupations (Slocum & Cron, 1985) and this, too, makes changing employers or career paths more difficult and undesirable. Supporting this contention, previous research suggests that job attitudes are typically higher among employees with greater work experience (Barrick & Zimmerman, 2009; Eichar, Brady, & Fortinsky, 1991).

Another reason why the amount of external job mobility might decline over time is the formation and stability of “career anchors” (Schein, 1990). As individuals gain more work experience in their fields, they become clearer in their own minds about the tradeoffs they are willing to make in managing their careers. Over time, these “career anchors” guide experienced workers toward jobs that are more likely to be fulfilling and steer them away from job situations which are likely to be poor fits (Feldman & Bolino, 1997; Ng & Feldman, 2007). As such, these career anchors may predispose mid- and late-career workers away from engaging in external job mobility.

In sum, for the reasons discussed, there appear to be differences in social norms regarding external job mobility across career stages. Namely, mid- and late-career workers are expected to have significantly less external job mobility than early-career

workers. Consistent with career timetable theory (Lawrence, 1988), then, managers might have less favorable evaluations of, and offer less attractive salaries to, those mid- and late-career workers who change jobs frequently. While positive attributions (like “finding themselves” or ambition) are more likely to be attached to mobile early-career employees, negative attributions (like “can’t hold a job” or “has trouble fitting in”) are more likely to be drawn about highly mobile mid- and late-career employees. Thus, while high external job mobility may benefit early-career workers by building more human and social capital, it may not necessarily benefit mid- and late-career workers as much.

### Hypotheses

Based on the above discussion, we make two predictions. First, consistent with the human capital theory and social capital theory, we predict a positive relationship between external job mobility and salary. Second, based on career timetable theory, we predict that the positive relationship between external job mobility and salary earned will be stronger for early-career workers than for mid- and late-career workers.

Because differences in employees' socio-demographic backgrounds can also result in salary differences (e.g., Amuedo-Dorantes & Serrano-Padial, 2007; Fuller, 2008; Grand & Tahlin, 2002; Murrell et al., 1996; Sturman et al., 2008; Topel & Ward, 1992), we included gender and education level as controls. Another possibility is that differences in salary observed could be due to differences in starting salaries, type of job (line/staff), industry, and/or supervisor performance ratings. Therefore, these four additional variables were included as control variables as well.

**Hypothesis 1.** External job mobility will be positively related to salary earned.

**Hypothesis 2.** The positive relationship of external job mobility with salary earned will be moderated by career stage. The relationship will be stronger for early-career workers than for mid- and late-career workers.

### Method

#### Sample and procedures

Data were collected from professionals and managers from 40 Fortune 500 corporations in the United States and 60 large publicly-traded companies in Hong Kong. The participating companies were from four industries: financial services, communications, hospitality, and retailing. Questionnaires were sent to potential participants through their companies' mail systems. Respondents were guaranteed anonymity and were provided with stamped, pre-addressed return envelopes. Respondents were also asked to give a copy of a performance evaluation form to their immediate supervisors. The supervisors then provided data on the job performance of their subordinates and returned these performance ratings directly to the researchers in pre-addressed return envelopes. All participants were guaranteed anonymity and ensured that the performance data being collected were for the sole purpose of this research project.

A total of 2145 employees in the U.S. and 2044 employees in Hong Kong were contacted. The response rate to the employee survey was 68% for the U.S. sample and 64% for the Hong Kong sample. A total of 1740 supervisors were contacted, and 1122 of them provided performance ratings for the employee respondents, representing a response rate of 64%. On average, each supervisor rated 2.3 employees. After removing respondents with missing survey data and employees without supervisor-rated performance ratings, the final research sample included 1378 U.S. and 1202 Hong Kong employees.

#### Measures

*External job mobility* was operationalized as the number of voluntary job changes an individual had over the past five years. We used a self-reported measure here because archival measures of historical voluntary job changes are seldom available from organizations (Brett & Stroh, 1997). Moreover, while the participating organizations have accurate data on the start dates of their current employees, individuals themselves would have more reliable data on the frequency of their voluntary job changes before joining their current employers. The median number of voluntary job changes that respondents had reported over the past five years was two (both in the Hong Kong and U.S. samples). We used this measure of raw frequency of job change in our data analysis.

*Career stage* was operationalized as years of work experience. Previous research has also used work experience to assess career stage (Jones, Chonko, Rangarajan, & Roberts, 2007; Kim & McLean, 2008; Kumar & Giri, 2009). The mean years of work experience was 15.28 years ( $SD = 8.42$  years).

The dependent variable was *pre-tax annual salary* (which includes commissions and bonuses but excludes fringe benefits). The mean annual salary for the Hong Kong sample was USD \$64,879 ( $SD = \$36,979$ ). The mean salary for the U.S. sample was USD\$ 82,734 ( $SD = \$18,647$ ). We observed that the data here were positively skewed; there was much more variance in the high end of the measure than in the low end. Thus, consistent with previous research, we performed a log transformation on this variable (Dunlap, Chen, & Greer, 1994).

Control variables

Gender was self-reported and coded as 0 = male and 1 = female. Education level was coded in terms of postgraduate degree attainment (0 = no, 1 = yes). Starting annual salary was self-reported pre-tax salary earned at the first job. The mean was USD\$ 22,323 in the Hong Kong sample (SD = \$229) and USD\$ 29,172 in the U.S. sample (SD = \$694). This measure was also log-transformed for data analyses. Job type was coded as staff (coded 0) or line (coded 1). Industry differences were controlled for by creating three dummy variables (000 = retailing, 001 = hospitality, 010 = communication, 100 = financial services). Job performance ratings were provided by employees' direct supervisors, and were measured with a three-item scale adapted from Heilman, Block, and Lucas's (1992) instrument. A sample item is: "This employee is very competent."

Results

Table 1 shows the means, standard deviations, and correlations among the variables for the U.S. and Hong Kong samples. We used multiple regression models to test our hypotheses. The results are presented in Table 2.

Hypothesis 1 predicts that external job mobility is positively related to salary attained. We observed that, for the U.S. sample, frequency of external job mobility has a significant positive effect ( $\beta = .53, p < .01$ ) on salary earned above and beyond controlled variables. Thus, Hypothesis 1 received support in the U.S. sample. This hypothesis has also received support in the Hong Kong sample as well. That is, the regression analyses showed that frequency of external job mobility has a significant positive effect ( $\beta = .55, p < .01$ ) on salary earned above and beyond the control variables.

Hypothesis 2 predicted that the positive relationships of external job mobility with salary would be stronger for early-career workers than for mid- and late-career workers. The results provide support for this hypothesis. Specifically, we found that, in the U.S. sample, there was a significant two-way interaction effect on salary earned (mobility  $\times$  career stage;  $\beta = .29, p < .01$ ). Similarly, in the Hong Kong sample, there was also a significant two-way interaction effect (mobility  $\times$  career stage;  $\beta = .30, p < .01$ ) on salary earned above and beyond controlled variables.

In order to understand the nature of the observed interaction effects, we plotted the interaction effects. Fig. 1 presents the covariate-adjusted interaction effects in graphical form for each sample. For the purpose of plotting of the interaction effects, we classified those with fewer than 10 years of work experience as early career (N = 384 for the Hong Kong sample, N = 475 for the U.S. sample), those with 10 to 20 years of work experience as mid-career (N = 417 and 462, respectively), and those with more than 20 years of work experience as late career (N = 401 and 441, respectively). Also, for the purpose of plotting the interaction effects, respondents who had two or more voluntary job changes over the past five years were put into the high mobility group, whereas respondents who have fewer than two changes were treated as the low mobility group. We used two as the dividing point here because, as noted before, the median number of organizations respondents had worked for over the past five years was two (both in the Hong Kong and U.S. samples).

Consistent with our hypothesis, in both the U.S. and Hong Kong samples, early-career individuals who were more mobile received significantly higher ( $p < .05$ ) compensation than did their less mobile counterparts. However, in both the U.S. and Hong Kong samples, mid-career individuals who were highly mobile attained no significantly higher salary levels than less mobile peers.

Table 1  
Means, standard deviations, and correlations among study variables.

Variables	U.S.		H.K.		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
	Mean	s.d.	Mean	s.d.											
1. Gender <sup>a</sup>	.52	.49	.54	.50	–										
2. Education <sup>b</sup>	.21	.43	.23	.44	.03	–									
3. Starting salary <sup>c</sup>	4.46	.04	4.35	.04	–.05	.06	–								
4. Staff/line <sup>d</sup>	.43	.49	.42	.49	–.30**	.06	–.05	–							
5. Industry Dummy 1 <sup>e</sup>	.34	.47	.32	.48	–.05	.03	–.05	.03	–						
6. Industry Dummy 2 <sup>e</sup>	.20	.40	.21	.39	–.03	.04	–.03	.04	.03	–					
7. Industry Dummy 3 <sup>e</sup>	.19	.39	.19	.40	.02	.03	.04	.05	.02	.03	–				
8. Supervisor-rated job performance	3.28	.84	3.31	.88	–.06	.05	.03	–.25**	.04	.04	.03	(.92)/	.40**	.06	.05
9. Year of work experience	14.85	8.31	13.36	7.83	–.24**	.05	.05	.05	.01	.05	.05	.38**	–	.04	.60**
10. External job mobility	1.32	1.07	1.62	1.31	–.29**	.04	.05	.04	.03	.01	.03	.03	.04	–	.27**
11. Current salary <sup>c</sup>	4.92	.08	4.81	.11	–.26**	.20**	.40**	.06	.04	.02	.01	.04	.62**	.25**	–

U.S. sample correlations are on the upper diagonal and H.K. sample correlations are on the lower diagonal. N = 1378 (U.S.), N = 1202 (H.K.). Cronbach's alphas appear on the diagonal for multiple-item measures.

\* p < .05.

\*\* p < .01.

<sup>a</sup> 0 = male, 1 = female.

<sup>b</sup> 0 = no postgraduate degree, 1 = with postgraduate degree.

<sup>c</sup> Log transformation on starting and current salary.

<sup>d</sup> 0 = staff, 1 = line.

<sup>e</sup> Industry Dummy 1, 2 and 3 (000 = retailing, 001 = hospitality, 010 = communication, 100 = financial services).

**Table 2**

The interaction effects of external job mobility and career stage on salary earned.

	Salary <sup>a</sup>	
	U.S.	H.K.
Covariates		
Gender <sup>b</sup>	.49**	.53**
Education <sup>c</sup>	.34*	.35*
Starting salary <sup>a</sup>	.56**	.62**
Staff/line <sup>d</sup>	.58**	.61**
Industry Dummy 1 <sup>e</sup>	.49**	.52**
Industry Dummy 2 <sup>e</sup>	.16	.19
Industry Dummy 3 <sup>e</sup>	.17	.16
Job performance	.46**	.57**
R <sup>2</sup>	.37	.39
Main effects		
Career stage (years of work experience)	.82**	.86**
External job mobility	.53**	.55**
ΔR <sup>2</sup>	.24	.25
Interactive effects		
Career stage × mobility	.29**	.30**
ΔR <sup>2</sup>	.06	.06

U.S. = the United States; H.K. = Hong Kong.

\* p &lt; .05.

\*\* p &lt; .01.

<sup>a</sup> Log transformation on starting and current salary.<sup>b</sup> 0 = male, 1 = female.<sup>c</sup> 0 = no postgraduate degree, 1 = with postgraduate degree.<sup>d</sup> 0 = staff, 1 = line.<sup>e</sup> 000 = retailing, 001 = hospitality, 010 = communication, 100 = financial services.

In addition, highly mobile late-career employees (both in the U.S. and Hong Kong samples) received significantly higher ( $p < .05$ ) salaries than did their less mobile counterparts. Finally, the positive effect of external job mobility on salary was significantly stronger ( $p < .05$ ) for early-career workers than for both mid- and late-career workers, supporting Hypothesis 2.

## Discussion

Several conclusions can be drawn from our study. First, consistent with previous research, external job mobility was found to be positively related to salary earned. Second, and more important, career stage is a significant moderator in the mobility–salary relationship. While highly mobile early-career individuals reported higher salaries than their less mobile peers, the positive effect was less significant for late-career individuals. Further, highly mobile mid-career individuals reported no significant differences in their salary when compared with the less mobile counterparts.

Surprisingly, we found a *positive* relationship between external job mobility and salary for late-career workers but a *null* relationship for the mid-career workers. There are at least three explanations for these findings. First, as individuals see the end of their careers in sight, job stability becomes a higher priority (Gibson, 2003). Consequently, there may be a shortage of highly-experienced workers in an industry who are excited about re-entering the external labor market. In order to attract these experienced workers, organizations might be forced to pay higher salaries to recruit them away from their current employers. Second, late-career employees may only be willing to switch employers if the salaries offered by other employers are substantially higher than what they currently make. As a result, the marginal gains which late-career employees can derive from external mobility might be much greater than the marginal gains which mid-career employees can derive. Third, differences in returns from external job mobility for late-career workers and mid-career workers may be due to the organization's estimates of how long these newly-acquired employees are likely to remain. Organizations typically assume that late-career employees are less likely to move in the future and that the new positions being offered are likely to be their last positions. In the case of mid-career employees who have already been highly mobile, though, organizations may be reluctant to pay top dollar because these employees could still have 20 years ahead of them in their careers and are likely to move once again.

The above findings highlight the limitations of the dominant theoretical perspectives on external mobility. Both human capital theory and social capital theory suggest that external job mobility will increase salary earned because it enhances knowledge and skill and expands social networks, both of which contribute to higher salary. While the current study provides clear support for that prediction among early-career and late-career workers, it is important to note that the human and social capital theories do not explain the null effects of external mobility we found here in mid-career. Similarly, career timetable theory suggests that late-career employees will benefit less from external job mobility because late-career mobility is inconsistent with normative beliefs about what is appropriate for these workers. However, we found evidence that late-career individuals are still able to generate positive returns from an external job mobility strategy and identified three potential reasons for this unexpected relationship above. Thus, career timetable theory does not fully explain the salary attainments of the late-career group.



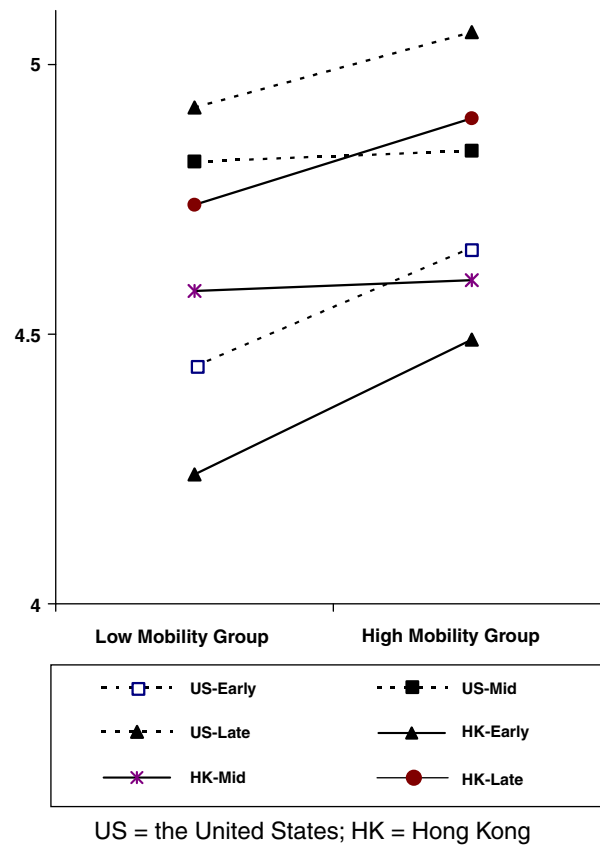


Fig. 1. The interaction effect of mobility and career stage on (log) salary.

Super's (1990) work on career stages, which highlights the range and distinctiveness of individual needs and work environments across career stages, may be more helpful in that regard. Thus, future research in this area should consider the characteristics of career stages in greater depth. For example, it appears that preferences for mobility do vary across career stages. For example, recent research continues to show that early-career workers tend to prefer more mobility whereas mid- and late-career workers might prefer less. Along the same line, Booth, Francesconi, and Garcia-Serrano (1999) found that half of all life-time job changes occurred in employees' first ten years in the workforce, while Segers, Inceoglu, Vloeberghs, Bartram, and Henderickx (2008) found that individuals with more work experience were less motivated to engage in job mobility.

On the other hand, constraints and opportunities for mobility also vary across career stages. Remaining negative stereotypes of older workers and greater numbers of dual wage-earning couples may put greater constraints on external mobility for mid- and late-career employees, while declining birth rates in major industrial countries and greater longevity might create more mobility opportunities for mid- and late-careers workers. In addition, more research is needed on both the strength and consensus of norms about external mobility for employees in different career stages. The research on boundaryless careers, for instance, suggests that shared assumptions about stage-appropriate mobility are beginning to break down (Arthur & Rousseau, 1996). Considered singly and/or collectively, these characteristics of career stages might moderate the relationship between external mobility and salary in different ways.

It is important to point out that the interpretations of the findings reported here have to be tempered by some limitations in the study. First, while we categorize workers into early-, mid-, and late-career workers based on their amount of work experience, it is possible that other operationalizations of career stage might have yielded somewhat different results (Cohen, 1991; Morrow & McElroy, 1987). Second, like other researchers (Brett & Stroh, 1997; Murrell et al., 1996), we used several self-report measures and some common method bias might be present. However, because several of our variables (e.g., salary, frequency of voluntary job changes) were not entirely attitudinal or perceptual in nature, the effects of common method bias might be less here. Third, we did not have direct measures of the reasons why employees made job changes or how they went about looking for external job opportunities (Delfgaauw, 2007). Future research should measure these implicit explanatory variables more explicitly.

Fourth, future studies in this area should also address the issue of causality with longitudinal studies. Certainly, the logic in the current study is that individuals who voluntarily change jobs more frequently will eventually accumulate higher salaries.

However, it is also possible to argue that individuals who make higher salaries are more likely to stay with an organization to safeguard their financial rewards. Moreover, there may be diminishing returns to salary achievement after many moves, and thus the relationship between job changes and salary may not be perfectly linear. Longitudinal studies would be particularly useful in eliminating alternative causal orderings, discovering non-linear relationships, and accounting for the effects of rate of external mobility.

Finally, to increase the external validity of these findings, it is necessary to replicate them in other industries. While the present study had a heterogeneous set of industries, they might have some unmeasured characteristic in common which limits the generalizability of the findings observed here. For instance, the results in the financial and retailing sectors might be more influenced by volatile economic conditions. The effects of external mobility might also vary depending upon the level of market competition and rivalry (as seen in the telecommunications industry) and perceived shortages of labor (as seen in the hospitality industry). In sum, future research on the relationship between job mobility and salary needs to take into greater consideration the nature of the industry environment as well.

### Conclusion

The present study highlights the importance of examining career stage as a moderator in the relationship between external job mobility and salary. We hope that this study provides a useful foundation for future research on the differential effects of job mobility on salary across career stages and further consideration of other potential individual- and situational-level moderators.

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