

How Effective is Individual Career Counseling for Employees with Low Career Autonomy?

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Abstract

This study examined the effectiveness of individual career counseling provided by in-house career counselors (CCs) for employees with low career autonomy in a Japanese corporate setting. Participants were 153 employees in their 30s and 40s at a large Japanese information technology company who received counseling from either CCs or supervisors. Career autonomy was assessed before and after counseling using the Career Autonomy Scale developed by Horiuchi and Okada (2016). After controlling for pre-counseling scores, no significant overall difference was found between the two counseling types. However, counseling provided by CCs improved career autonomy primarily among employees with low initial autonomy, whereas supervisor counseling improved career autonomy in both the low- and high-autonomy groups and had stronger effects than counseling provided by CCs on behavioral autonomy, including networking behavior and career development behavior. These findings suggest that counseling provided by CCs serves as a psychologically safe support resource for employees with low readiness for self-directed career development, highlighting the importance of differentiated career support roles within Japanese organizations.

Background

In 2016, a major policy shift in Japan transferred primary career development responsibility from organizations to employees. This shift was notable because Japanese companies had long operated under a seniority-based, long-term employment system in which job assignments, rotations, and career paths were centrally managed by organizations. Consequently, many employees were not accustomed to planning their own careers, which created a gap between policy expectations and employees' psychological readiness for self-directed career

management. Against this background, in-house career counselors (CCs) have become increasingly important as companies seek to support employees' career development and well-being. In Japan, CCs are nationally certified professionals who provide career support under a nationally authorized qualification, ensuring a standardized level of expertise.

A structural feature unique to Japanese companies is that supervisors are responsible not only for performance evaluation but also for conducting career interviews. In the context of this study, "supervisor counseling" refers to career interviews conducted by an employee's

direct manager (e.g., a section manager or senior manager), who oversees both performance evaluation and career discussions. Because these interviews are embedded in evaluation systems, employees may hesitate to discuss personal concerns openly. In contrast, CCs operate independently of evaluation and human resources decision-making, providing a confidential and psychologically safe environment. This institutional context is essential for interpreting the potentially different effects of counseling provided by CCs and supervisors.

Career autonomy, often used interchangeably with career self-reliance in the Japanese context, is associated with employability and performance (Horiuchi & Okada, 2016). However, because Japanese employees have historically had limited discretion over career decisions, career autonomy tends to reflect psychological readiness rather than structural freedom. The Career Autonomy Scale includes psychological and behavioral subfactors, thereby assessing a multidimensional construct relevant to organizational career development. A qualitative study also suggested that supervisor-led career interviews may promote career-related behaviors in Japanese companies (Fukuda, 2024).

This study quantitatively examines how counseling provided by CCs and supervisors affects employees' career autonomy, with particular attention to employees with low initial autonomy who may benefit most from structured and psychologically safe support. Prior research has not quantitatively compared these two forms of counseling in corporate settings, leaving an important gap that this study aims to address.

Methods

Participants were 153 employees in their 30s and 40s from a large Japanese information technology company. Of these, 94 chose counseling provided by CCs, and 59 chose supervisor counseling. Career autonomy was quantified before and after counseling using the Career Autonomy Scale (Horiuchi & Okada, 2016), which includes seven validated subfactors across psychological and behavioral domains. The psychological domain includes clarity of occupational self-image, proactive career formation motivation, and awareness of personal responsibility for one's career. The behavioral domain comprises proactive work behavior, networking behavior, adaptation to changes in the occupational environment, and career development behavior. Surveys were administered before and after the counseling sessions.

Analyses included *t* tests; chi-square tests; analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) controlling for pre-counseling scores; and comparisons across employee attributes such as job level, job type, gender, and hiring category (new graduate recruits versus mid-career hires). This analytical approach enabled the examination of both overall effects and subgroup-specific patterns.

Results

Overall Effects

The ANCOVA results showed no significant main effect of counseling type on overall career autonomy after controlling for pre-counseling scores, $F(1, 150) = 2.87, p = .092$. This result indicates that, on average, counseling provided by CCs and supervisors did not differ significantly in their overall career autonomy outcomes. However, this aggregate result may mask important subgroup differences.

Effects on Low-Autonomy Employees

Participants were divided into high- and low-autonomy groups based on the mean pre-counseling score of 3.72. Counseling provided by CCs improved career autonomy only in the low-autonomy group (mean change [ΔM] $\approx +0.22$, standard error ≈ 0.05), whereas supervisor counseling improved career autonomy in both groups. This pattern suggests that counseling provided by CCs may be particularly well suited to the needs of employees who lack psychological readiness for self-directed career management.

Behavioral Autonomy

Supervisor counseling significantly improved behavioral autonomy and produced larger gains than counseling provided by CCs in networking behavior ($\Delta M \approx +0.17$ compared with $+0.05$) and career development behavior ($\Delta M \approx +0.21$ compared with $+0.07$). These short-term, action-oriented behaviors may be more readily promoted in the structured context of supervisor counseling. No significant changes in these behavioral subfactor scores were observed following counseling provided by CCs, suggesting that supervisor counseling may be more effective in prompting immediate behavioral responses.

Attribute Differences

Counseling provided by CCs was particularly effective for groups with lower career autonomy: non-managers, technical employees, men, and new graduate recruits. This pattern closely aligns with the low-autonomy profile identified earlier. In contrast, supervisor counseling was effective for six of the eight attributes but not for technical employees or mid-career hires. These patterns suggest that CCs and supervisors may play distinct but mutually

reinforcing roles in organizational career support.

Discussion

The findings indicate that counseling provided by CCs may be particularly beneficial for employees with low career autonomy, especially those with low initial scores. The neutrality and confidentiality of CCs may create a psychologically safe environment that enables employees to reflect on their career concerns without fear of evaluation. This “safety net” function may be especially valuable in Japanese companies, where supervisors are responsible for both evaluation and career interviews, which may make it difficult for employees to discuss sensitive issues openly.

Supervisor counseling, in contrast, appears to be effective in increasing behavioral autonomy in the short term. Because supervisor counseling is embedded in organizational performance systems, it may encourage concrete networking and career development behaviors. These differing strengths suggest that CCs and supervisors may play distinct but complementary roles.

Practical Implications

Organizations should differentiate the roles of supervisors and CCs. Supervisors are well positioned to promote behavioral autonomy and support action-oriented development. CCs, by contrast, are particularly effective for employees with low psychological readiness for career self-management, including non-managers, technical employees, and new graduate recruits.

Counseling provided by CCs can serve as a safety net for employees who hesitate to discuss career concerns with supervisors. Strengthening collaboration between supervisors and CCs may create a more consistent and comprehensive support

system that addresses both the behavioral and psychological aspects of career development. For international practitioners, these findings illustrate how institutional context shapes the effectiveness of different career support roles in Japanese organizations.

References

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