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# Building job-related ownership in early career professionals: psychological ownership in the workplace

**Deborah Taylor**

Bournemouth University Business School

**Professor Adele Ladkin**

Bournemouth University

**Dr Lois Farquharson**

Bournemouth University Business School

## Conference paper

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## Practitioner notes

### What is psychological ownership?

In the same way that we can feel attached to certain possessions such as our cars, our homes, a special pair of shoes or a meaningful gift, we can also have similar feelings in the workplace towards our job role and the organisation itself even though they do not physically exist. This is known as psychological ownership (PO) and is commonly defined as:

*the state in which individuals feel as though the target of ownership or a piece of that target is 'theirs' (that is, 'It is mine!').* (Pierce et al 2003, p86)

This emotional connection and feeling of 'mine' results in many positive outcomes for the individual and the organisation, such as job satisfaction and organisational commitment and satisfies many individual desires linking to our self-identity, sense of belonging and desire to feel in control (Pierce et al, 2001; 2003). This makes PO an attractive construct for organisational leaders and HR departments looking to embed a sense of ownership into their workplace. However, due to its complex and multifaceted nature, researchers are still trying to ascertain the practical means in which organisations and managers can encourage the development of PO in the workplace.

### What does the study add?

This study highlights how PO might be developed in individuals at the start of their careers, which is a neglected area of research. The study found that:

- 1 Feelings of ownership for a job role can be developed earlier than originally considered (around three months) and that attachments can still develop for those in temporary roles.
- 2 Line managers can use a building-block approach to facilitate early career professionals taking ownership – initially via ownership of tasks, building up to ownership of the whole job role.
- 3 There is a strong relational aspect to psychological ownership, which allows PO to be 'given' to early career professionals through their line manager, trust and an ownership work culture, and 'taken' by individuals who are motivated to build self-efficacy, a professional identity and/or a sense of belonging.
- 4 Job-crafting may also facilitate opportunities for early-career professionals to take ownership.
- 5 While ownership can give great pleasure, there can also be a 'weight of ownership' felt by early-career professionals and especially for those with the strongest feelings of ownership.

### Implications for practitioners

HR departments can facilitate PO in early-career professionals by utilising the COLTOS 'Giving Ownership' Framework:

**C**ontrol, self-investment and job-crafting opportunities

**O**rganisational culture facilitating ownership

**L**ine manager 'giving' ownership

**T**rust and other forms of psychological safety

**O**pportunities for self-congruity

**S**tress management systems in place.

## Introduction

'Giving ownership' sounds like a simple workplace transfer of ownership between a manager and staff member, yet because it may be emotion-laden with previous experiences, personal feelings and values from both giver and taker, it elicits a significant level of complexity which may have been underestimated. This paper provides an overview of PO and how it can be successfully 'given' by managers and 'taken' by early-career professionals (ECPs) in the workplace.

Managers have often wondered why some individuals seem more attached to their job role or organisation than their colleagues and what potential benefits this attachment may bring. Scholars have tried to answer these questions through the lens of psychological ownership. Since the early 2000s, this concept has become increasingly popular due to its association with a range of organisational and individual benefits. These include job satisfaction, affective commitment, in-role performance, organisational commitment, organisational citizenship behaviour and organisational-based self-esteem (Van Dyne and Pierce, 2004; (Mayhew et al, 2007; Avey et al, 2009; Wang et al, 2018; Zhang et al, 2020).

To date, PO research has mainly focused on the establishment phase or middle career phases of individuals. Although useful, this misses the crucial stage when individual professional identities are still developing and are malleable. The purpose of this study was to explore the development of work-related PO in individuals at the start of their career, using a sample of work placement students from a post-1992 university. These participants are at the start of their career and are managing the demands of transitioning from education into working life and moving from a 'student' to 'worker' identity. They have relatively little previous work experience (other than part-time work) and are working on a work placement with a fixed end date, thus making their experiences transitory. This makes them perfect to help understand the development of PO and how organisations, teams and managers can successfully empower ownership feelings.

## Psychological ownership

Our daily lives are surrounded by possessions: some practical, some personally meaningful but of little financial worth, and some that feel central to our lives. Our relationship with our possessions can be a complex, multi-faceted, multi-layered phenomenon (Furby, 1978; Mittal, 2006) with some possessions becoming part of our extended self and anchoring our identities (Belk, 1988). Feelings of possession and ownership are at the core of PO and thus there are many similar feelings related to our job role as we have for our favourite possessions.

The notion of PO was first introduced by management scholars suggesting a form of organisational ownership that went beyond legal requirements. Pierce et al (2001) suggest PO has a cognitive and affective element in which individuals feel possessive towards certain workplace targets – targets being anything people can become attached to even if it is immaterial (Pierce et al, 2001; 2003; Pierce et al, 2004; Van Dyne and Pierce, 2004). Therefore, in the same way that some possessions come to be considered an extension of

ourselves and link to our sense of satisfaction, status, social power, and accomplishments, so can our job role or organisation.

For PO to successfully develop, individuals need to look favourably towards their job role or the organisation. If they dislike their work or disagree with the company values, it will be harder for managers to facilitate positive feelings. However, if the conditions are right, early PO research suggested it may emerge by utilising three different means (Pierce et al, 2001; 2003; Pierce et al, 2004; Van Dyne and Pierce, 2004):

- control over the job role
- investing of self into the job role (being able to make changes/offer suggestions)
- having intimate knowledge of the job role.

Other theorists have suggested the importance of psychological safety (Zhang et al, 2020) and self-congruity – the match between the job role and self-identity (Morewedge, 2021).

## Methods

To understand how PO was developed in ECPs, we conducted qualitative, semi-structured interviews with 20 work placement students, four employers from three different organisations, and three placement development advisers. These advisers are individuals employed by the university to visit students and their line managers during the placement. One researcher completed all of the interviews either face-to-face or virtually between March 2019 and February 2020, before the start of the pandemic. Data was then analysed using reflective thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006; 2013; 2014; 2016; 2019; 2021b; Clarke and Braun, 2017; 2018).

## Results

The research highlighted four themes, and this paper will outline three of these, including the giving and taking of ownership, as well as the pleasure and pain of ownership. The participants' words are used to illustrate some examples, although to protect their privacy, a code signifies the participant voice: 'E' for employers and 'ECP' for early-career professional.

### Giving ownership

'Giving ownership' relates to the relational and organisational process that permits ECPs to take job-related PO. It is an active, dynamic social exchange process whereby ECPs are given ownership for small tasks, then through a building-block-type approach, moved onto ownership of larger tasks/projects, eventually leading to ownership of their entire job role.

There are three key elements to giving ownership successfully – organisational culture, the line manager/supervisor and trust. The results from this study suggest that giving permission of ownership facilitated PO development through the suggested means of control within the job role, opportunities for self-investment, feeling psychologically safe, self-congruity and in some cases feeling intimate knowledge of the target.

Nonetheless, to develop this attachment relatively quickly, the process also relied on an organisational culture that encourages ownership and allows supervisors to trust and support their ECPs in psychologically safe conditions. ECPs can then actively take

ownership, crafting, controlling and investing their energy into their job role. Attachments to work targets can be instantaneous if the job role is well aligned to the individual and can be strengthened by a constant reiteration of crafting and control. A circle of positive validation from supervisors and team members facilitated this process and the development of professional identities. In organisations where ownership was valued and encouraged, most of the ECPs were taking ownership of their job role within three to six months, which is far quicker than previous research has suggested.

## Ownership as a culture and value

Where ownership was an organisational value, ownership expectations were signalled early on in the recruitment process. During assessment centre activities and interviews, ownership was a measured competency – candidates were asked to demonstrate and provide examples of previous ownership experiences, and to show ownership in group activities.

The act of giving task/job-related ownership was mentioned by employers (*'So literally I give ownership'* (E)) providing a signal and permission to the employee that ownership has been transferred to them, even if initially on a small scale. It was also referred to by ECPs, with the quote below describing how their line manager gave them ownership:

*She slowly started testing me... it started with, 'answer a few emails, you get back to them, you do this,' and then slowly, like, 'oh, this is the big document, you can monitor it.'* (ECP)

Ownership of tasks was found to be a means of constructing job-related PO through ongoing development of the range and importance of tasks, often directed by the supervisor or team. This building-block approach employed by many organisations allowed supervisors to demonstrate trust in their new charges and to help their new employees understand the business environment they were now operating in. This process is akin to that described by Furby (1978) when considering the development of feelings of possession and ownership in children. Initially dependent on others to provide them with possessions, they gradually assert themselves to take control of the acquisition process before becoming responsible for these possessions.

In organisations where ownership was embedded, it was sometimes demonstrated via a supported 'sink or swim' approach, where ECPs were expected to take ownership and learn from their mistakes with the supervisor on hand to support them if needed. This form of management made the ECPs feel trusted, often giving them the confidence to take on more responsibility.

There were examples of organisations that either did not have ownership embedded or the line manager gave ownership with caveats. In these instances, ownership was sporadic because it was not permissioned in a form that made it accessible. Often, it impacted the ECPs' confidence levels and their progress was limited, slowed or they second-guessed requests. Even individuals who suggested previous ownership in part-time jobs or education were left feeling uncertain and *'like a 10-year-old again'* (ECP). For ownership to be successfully given, it needs to be clear, unambiguous and given with trust and support.

## Taking ownership

Our analysis indicates two forms of ownership being taken. One form is an acceptance of being 'given' ownership by a supervisor, mentor, or team member which facilitates future opportunities to take ownership. The second form is when ownership has not been offered, but the ECP decides to take ownership, nevertheless. Both forms are active, relational and

rely on individual motives of self-efficacy, linking to self-identity or a sense of belonging, and having a clear PO route (such as control, self-congruity, investing self, some elements of psychological safety or a desire to build intimate knowledge of the target).

If ownership was given by the supervisor, the ECP then had the opportunity to accept or reject ownership. While it was rare for individuals to reject ownership outright, there was a strength continuum where some individuals accepted, took and developed job-related ownership to a far greater degree than others. The building blocks of ownership then led most ECPs to craft their job role and in some instances moving the relational boundaries of tasks or networks. Job-crafting therefore seems to play an important role in facilitating PO development, providing a 'bottom-up' approach of worker control and self-investment rather than just the top-down process of job design highlighted by Pierce et al (2009) and Peng and Pierce (2015). Good job design will contribute to opportunities for ownership and allows organisations to facilitate PO through the suggested routes. But opportunities for forms of job crafting may be more important.

## Pleasure and pain of ownership

There is a duality of outcomes relating to PO which organisations and individuals should be aware of. There are the many suggested positive PO outcomes which were also observed in this study, including job satisfaction, self-esteem, affective commitment, in-role performance, proactive work behaviour and job engagement (Van Dyne and Pierce, 2004; Mayhew et al, 2007; Avey et al, 2009; Avey et al, 2012; Knapp et al, 2019; Peng and Pierce, 2015; Wang, et al, 2018; Zhang et al, 2020), all of which makes PO so beneficial for both individuals and their organisations.

Pierce et al (2001) suggest that PO is pleasure-producing, and the intensity of feelings demonstrated by the ECPs showed the highs that are achieved when ownership is taken. It is worth remembering those highs are partly a result of socially sanctioned praise and it was the circle of validation that helped ECPs develop greater confidence and pride in their work.

Taking responsibility for their job role or a project often resulted in feelings of excitement and exhilaration linking to both self-efficacy and self-identity. By investing self and entwining control, care or other forms of energy, they were able to become 'one' with the job role and so the pride felt when successfully managing something complex was so much the greater. These are new, inexperienced employees who experienced great personal satisfaction and joy when success came.

This pleasure also built confidence that resulted in the ECPs sharing more ideas and taking on more responsibility. By feeling responsible for targets, some individuals also felt a sense of achievement and purpose.

*Sense of purpose. Sense of achievement when it goes well. Just feeling really responsible, really being part of it. (ECP)*

Nonetheless, this sense of responsibility can have negative implications, with the weight of PO also mentioned – which did seem to result in high stress levels in some instances. There seemed to be a genuine concern about letting people down and this, combined with a fear of failure, led some ECPs to internalise stress rather than talking to their line managers. For those ECPs who seemed to show high levels of ownership, their lives were consumed by this ownership. This shows that for some, while PO can have many positive implications, for others, this desire to possess can be all-consuming and may take over an individual's life if

not properly managed. Given the big shift to remote working, this may be less observable to line managers. Organisations may therefore need to identify ECPs who demonstrate high levels of ownership to ensure that this aspect does not become all-consuming. One ECP's experience sums up how job-related PO possessed him:

*This is something that I've really had to battle with... I think I always want to do the best... it means that I sometimes did work too hard, and I was overtired and it got to the point where my parents even got involved and said, you really need to just manage your workload. (ECP)*

This was an extreme example, but there were other participants who mentioned the weight of ownership and thus it is something that line managers and HR teams need to be aware of.

## Implications for managers and those involved in early career development

Psychological ownership has many staff benefits and can be especially rewarding at the start of an individual's career. To ensure it is successfully implemented, we would recommend using the COLTOS 'Giving Ownership' Framework:

- C**ontrol, self-investment and job-crafting opportunities
- O**rganisational culture facilitating ownership
- L**ine manager 'giving' ownership
- T**rust and other forms of psychological safety
- O**pportunities for self-congruity
- S**tress management systems in place.

## HR departments and line managers

Recommendations linked to this framework start with organisations first ascertaining to what extent they have an ownership work culture and/or if it is something that they wish to develop.

Ownership cultures may be significantly different in some organisations, but if there is a desire for staff to feel job-related PO, organisations need to create a 'giving ownership' culture at all levels within the organisation. A building-block process within departments is likely to be the most successful initial form, starting with departmental leaders 'giving ownership' to staff they line-manage and working downwards to other levels of management. While this is a study about early career professionals, it may be relatively challenging for an individual line manager to give ownership in isolation. As such, embedding departmental ownership will most likely lead to the required organisational culture.

If giving ownership becomes a part of organisational processes such as recruitment and onboarding, and are tied to organisational values, there is a greater chance of PO being embedded within the organisation more quickly.

Line managers are key to the 'giving ownership' framework, and the reality is that not all line managers naturally give ownership. Help line managers understand the 'giving ownership'

process through workshops to ensure ownership is clearly offered and permissioned. Trust and a supported 'sink or swim' approach can allow individuals to learn from mistakes.

As job-related PO is a socially constructed process, managers should not underestimate the intricacies involved and should consider if they openly and trustingly give ownership or if prior experiences, such as giving ownership grudgingly or with caveats, may cloud the process.

Second, role models are important to signpost how to permission ownership and trust. This can help other managers understand how to give ownership clearly and unconditionally in the workplace.

Line managers should provide building blocks for developing job-related PO for ECPs, starting with small tasks and building up to the whole job role. Control and job-crafting allow opportunities for self-investment that provide those pleasurable job satisfaction elements, as well as pride and increasing confidence. Job-crafting also helps to develop self-congruity by providing opportunities to alter the role or participate in projects that link to their identity.

Ensure psychological safety of staff members and, in particular, develop stress management processes for ECPs. Bear in mind that the fear of failure or letting down line managers may mean that ECPs do not indicate feelings of stress while still experiencing it. In addition, the burden of ownership which can be felt at any level should also be taken into account. Informal, regular face-to-face conversations will be helpful, as is workload management, in particular.

While the new framework does not include organisational PO by building job-related PO in an organisation, there are opportunities to simultaneously strengthen feelings of organisational PO. This is particularly true in an ownership organisational culture that encourages individuals to take ownership in a psychologically safe environment.

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# CIPD

Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development  
151 The Broadway London SW19 1JQ United Kingdom  
**T** +44 (0)20 8612 6200 **F** +44 (0)20 8612 6201  
**E** [cipd@cipd.co.uk](mailto:cipd@cipd.co.uk) **W** [cipd.co.uk](http://cipd.co.uk)

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